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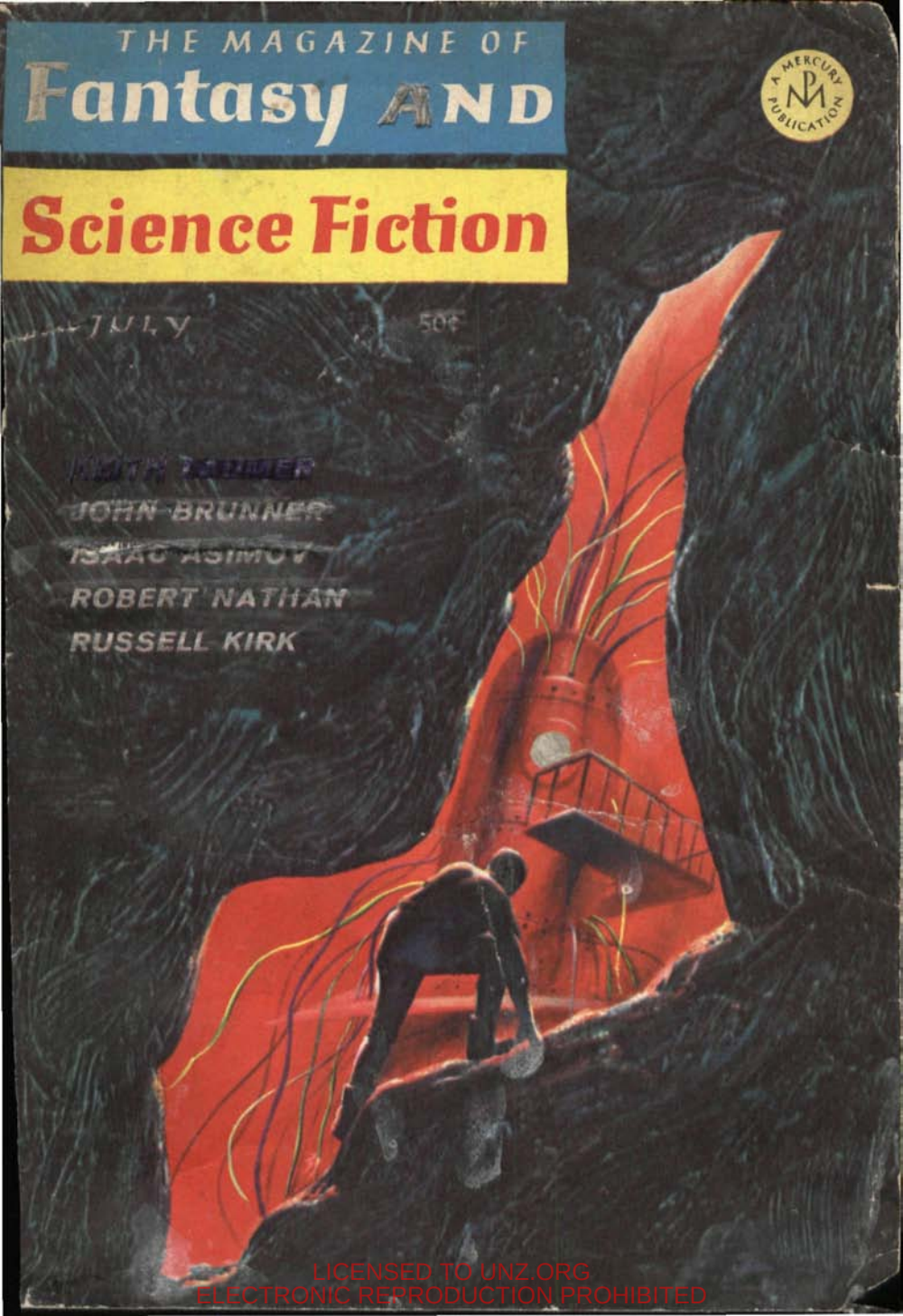

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

JULY

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Keith Laumer, a former Foreign Service officer, is perhaps best known for his humorous stories about James Retief, Galactic Diplomat. This is not a Retief story, but Laumer's talent and experience are by no means confined to galactic and international diplomacy. The introduction to NINE BY LAUMER (*Doubleday 1967*) *says that Laumer spent a year in Labrador, as an Air Force officer, "and made the verge-of-madness discovery that exposure to extreme cold slows the metabolism, thus increasing the subjective time-rate. He spent all of his time outside freezing, and completed the year in three and a half months." There is a little of that surrealistic discovery in this short novel, with its literally cold premise —cryobiology or "cryonics" (freezing after death)—and its scorching pace.*

THE DAY BEFORE FOREVER

by Keith Laumer

PROLOGUE

SOMEWHERE A BELL WAS RINGing. The Old Man reached out in the darkness, fumbled across rumpled silks for the heavy velvet pull cord. He tugged it twice, imperiously.

"Sir!" a voice responded instantly.

"Get him!"

The Old Man lay back among the scattered cushions.

He's alive he thought. *Somewhere in the city, he's alive again. . . .*

1

It was a narrow street, without curbs or sidewalks, jammed between flat grey walls that ran in a straight line as far as I could see. Misty light filtered down from above on a heavy ornamental ironwork gate set in the wall across the way. There were no people in sight, no parked cars, no doorways,

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no windows. Just the wall and the gate and street. Cold rain was trickling down my face, and a cut on my lip was leaking salty blood that mixed with the rain. I looked at the palms of my hands; they were crisscrossed with shallow cuts, and there were rust and grime in the cuts. That started me trying to remember when I'd had my last tetanus shot, but thinking just made my head hurt worse.

A few feet to the left an alley mouth cut back into the wall behind me. I had a feeling something unpleasant might come out of it any minute now, and a little curiosity stirred as to what it might be, but it was just a passing thought. I needed a dark hole to crawl into and hide before I could take much interest in unimportant matters, such as where I was and what I was running from. I got a good grip on my head and pushed away from the wall. The pavement rocked like a Channel steamer in a three-quarter gale, but it stayed under me. I made the thirty feet to the other side of the street and put a shoulder against the wall to steady it and waited for the little whirling lights to go away. My pulse was hammering a little, but no worse than you'd expect after the kind of weekend that could put a man out on a strange pavement talking to himself. The chills were fading out now, and I was starting to sweat. My coat felt tight under the arms, and the collar was rubbing the back of my neck. I looked at my sleeve. It was stiff, shiny cloth: no class, no style. Somebody else's coat. I breathed through my teeth a few times to blow some of the fog out of my brain. It must have been one hell of a party, but it was all gone now, like easy money.

I checked my pockets; except for some loose threads and a pinch of lint, I was as clean as a Salvation Army lassie catching the last bus back from the track. I had the feeling I was overlooking something; just then the placard attached to the gate caught my eye. Weathered block letters spelled out:

PARK CLOSED AT SUNDOWN
BY ORDER OF COMMISSION
ENTER AT RISK OF LIFE

I looked through the gate. If it was a park, there might be a nice patch of grass to lie down on. The line about risk of life might have called for some looking into, but next to a nap, what was a little gamble like that? I pushed on the iron curlicues and the gate swung in.

White marble steps led down, flanked by big urns full of black fronds. At the bottom, a wide flagstone walk led away between clipped borders and flowering shrubs as formal as gowned matrons. The dark green smell of night-blooming flowers was strong here; I heard the soft play of water in a fountain that caught reflections

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from lights strung in the hedges. Away in the distance beyond the park other lights crossed the sky in rows like high bridges. The breeze made lonesome noises in the branches over me.

The walkway I was on was patterned brick, bordered by little white flowers that led away into the shadows of trees. I followed it, listening for sneaky footsteps behind me. As far as I could tell, there weren't any, but the exposed feeling up my back didn't go away.

There was something on the grass, under the trees ahead. Something pale, with a shape that I couldn't quite make out. At first I thought it was an old pair of pants; then it looked like a naked man lying with his upper half in shadow. I kept on trying to make it look that way until I was ten feet from it; at that range, I quit kidding myself. It was a man, all right, but his upper half wasn't in shadow. It wasn't there at all. He'd been cut in two just below the ribs.

I circled around him, maybe with a vague idea of finding the rest of him. Up closer, I could see he'd been bisected by hand, not neatly, but in a businesslike way, as if the cutter had a lot of carcasses to get out tonight and couldn't waste too much time on fancy cleaver-work. There wasn't much blood around; he'd been drained before being cut up. I was just getting ready to roll him over in case he was lying on a clue, when something made a little sound no louder than a grain of corn popping.

I moved off across turf like black Wilton, stepped in under an odor of juniper and stared at a lot of shadowy shapes that might have been twenty-man gangs for all I knew, and waited for something that seemed to be about to happen. A minute went by that way.

With no more sound than a shadow makes moving along a wall, a man stepped into view fifteen feet from me. He put his head up and sniffed the air like a hound. When he turned his head, his eyes caught the light with a dull shine. He stood with one shoulder high, the other twisted under the load of a hump like a crouched monkey. His face was pock-marked, and there were scars across his shaved skull. A lumpy strip of keloid ran from under his left ear down under the collar of a thick sweater. Heavy thigh muscles showed through tight pants with a camouflage pattern of diagonal grey lozenges. There was a heavy wooden handle in his belt with a blade that was honed to a thin finger of steel like a butcher's trimming knife. He swung slowly; when he was facing my way, he stopped. I stood still and tried to think like a plant. He squinted into the shadows, and then grinned, not a pretty grin.

"Come out nice, sweetie," he had a husky bass growl that went with the scar on his throat. "Keep the hands in sight."

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I didn't move. He made a quick motion with his left hand; there was a soft sound, and a second man came out of the bushes on his left, hefting a working length of iron pipe. This one was older, wider, with thick arms and bowed legs and a stubbly beard shot with grey. He had little sow's-eyes that flicked past me and back.

The hunchback touched his filed blade with a finger and said, "All alone in the park, hey? That ain't smart, palsy."

"Chill the buzz," the one with the beard said through his left nostril. "Slice it and haul, that's the rax."

He reached inside his shirt, brought something out gripped in his fist; I got a whiff of a volatile polyester.

The hunchback moved closer.

"You got anybody'll buy you for live meat?" He talked with a lot of mouth movement that showed me a thick pink tongue and broken teeth. Off to my left, somebody was generating a fair amount of noise making yardage around to my rear. I ignored that, ignored the question.

"Better open up," the hunchback slid the knife out and held it on his palm. I took a step out from under the tree then.

"Don't scare me to death," I told him. "I've got friends on the force."

"Talks like a Cruster," the bearded one whined. "Caw, Rutch, take the mothering weed down."

"Try me, baby," I threw a line at him, just to keep him interested. "I eat your kind for breakfast."

Behind me, a stick cracked. Rutch tossed the knife on his palm, then stepped in and feinted short. I didn't move. That meant I was slow. Beaver hefted his pipe and took a bite out of the inside of his cheek. Rutch was watching my hands. He didn't see any gun, so he moved in that last foot and gave the high sign.

Behind me, the Indian-fighter took a noisy step and wrapped arms around me and leaned back. That put him where I wanted him. I used my right shoe to rake down his shin and tramp hard on his arch. The grip slipped an inch, which gave me room to snap-kick the hunchback below the knee. The bone went with a crunch like a dropped plate. I gripped hands with myself and gave the lad behind me a couple of elbows in the short ribs; he *oofed* and let go, and Rutch fell past me in time for me to meet Beaver coming in with his club swung up overhead like the royal executioner getting set to lop off a head. I caught his arm between my crossed wrists, shifted grips, and broke his elbow. He hit on his face and squealed, and the club bounced off my back.

The one who had done the back door work was on his hands and knees, coming up. He looked like a half-breed Chinaman, with a wide, shiny face and lots of unhealthy-

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looking fat along the jaw line. I sent him back with a knee to the chin and stood over him, breathing hard; my wind wasn't what it should have been. I was glad none of them looked like getting up; one more good play would have taken me then.

The Chinaman and the beard were out cold, but the one called Rutch was humping on the grass like a baby mouse in a bonfire. I went over to him and flipped him on his back.

"Your boys are soft, and too slow for the job," I told him. I nodded at what was on the grass. "Your work?"

He spat in the direction of my left knee and missed.

"Nice town," I said. "What's the name of it?"

His mouth worked. The stubble on his head was orange-red, and up close I could see the pale freckles across the knob of gristle he used for a nose. A tough redhead in spite of the back. I put a foot on his hand and leaned on it.

"Tell it, Red. What's the racket?"

He made a move and I leaned a little harder.

"Deathers . . . in the park . . . tonight . . .!" He said it in quick gasps, like a drowning man dictating a will between waves.

"More detail, Red. I catch on slow."

"Blackies . . ." There was a little foam at the corners of his mouth, and he was grunting softly, like a hound dreaming of rabbits. I didn't blame him for that. A broken knee is pretty hard to bottle up. Then his eyes rolled up. I started to turn away, half heard the sound and swung back, saw the shine on the blade in his hand an instant before I felt the blow low on my back and the pain of the knife.

The shock effect on the human nervous system of a stab wound varies a lot with different subjects. Sometimes the victim falls out flat on his face before he's lost the first ounce of blood. Other times he'll walk home, go to bed, and quietly bleed to death, unaware that he's even been hit. With me it was somewhere in between. I felt the blade hit bone and deflect upward, and all the while my right hand was coming around edge-on in a flat arc that connected with Red's upper maxillary just below the nose, a messy spot. He fell back hard and didn't move, and I stood over him, trying to get hold of my side with both hands. A heavy pulse was gushing down over my hip like a spillway. I took three steps, felt my knees going, sat down hard on the ground, still trying to hold the wound closed. I was clear-headed, but the strength had gone out of me like moonshine out of a dropped jug. I sat there listening to my pulse hammer in my ears and thinking about trying it again just as soon as it quieted down.

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Come on, Dravek, on your feet. Back home you're supposed to be a tough guy. . . .

I made what I thought was a move to get up and went over sideways, slowly, like an old tree falling. I lay there with a mouthful of sod, listening to the wind sighing in the trees, a soft gobbling sound from Rutch or one of his boys—and another sound, like stealthy feet creeping up through the underbrush. Or maybe it was just the bats flapping their wings in the attic. My eyes were wide open, and I could see the fat Chinaman's feet, and beyond him a lot of black shadows. One of the shadows moved, and a man was standing there, looking at me.

He was small, lean, spidery, dressed in tight black. He came across toward me, through a sort of luminous mist that had sprung up suddenly. I thought of a couple of things I wanted to say, but somebody had cut the strings operating my talk-box. I watched him skirt the Chinaman, come over and stop a couple of feet from me. It was very dark now; I could barely make out the shape of his boots against the black. I heard a sound that seemed to be a nice easy laugh, like a guy who's just heard a mildly funny joke, and a voice from a long way off say, "Neat, very neat. . . ."

Things got hazy then. I felt hands moving over me; the pain in my side was like a line of fading red fire.

"Lie still," somebody said in a whispery voice. "I have to stop the bleeding."

I started to say that Red had put the point in an inch too high, that all he'd sliced was fat and gristle, but it came out as a grunt.

"I gave you a shot of fun-juice," the same voice said. It was a breathy tenor, as soft as a fog at sea. "It was all I had."

I grunted on purpose this time and rolled over on my face, watching the trees sail past like the view from a merry-go-round. I got my feet under me and climbed to my feet like a weekend Alpinist doing the last few yards to the top of Anapurna. We looked at each other across a stretch of smooth-mowed grass unmarred by anything except three and a half corpses.

He was a slender-built, dainty-moving man with the sharp, complicated features of a Bourbon king, a sleek, narrow head with bugged-out eyes set on the corners of it, deft hands in black kid gloves. The tight pants were tucked into short boots, and he wore a ducky little vest with ruffles along the top edge over a black turtleneck.

"Who were they?" My voice came out in a croak.

He glanced down at the Chinaman; the fat face had that vacant, collapsed look you see on photos of bodies found on a battlefield. The little man's lip lifted to show me a row of sharp teeth that were too white to be real.

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"Scum," he said delicately. "Baiters; cold-meat men. Their kind are the lowest of the low." He laughed. "Whereas, I am the highest of the low." A light came and went behind his eyes like a signal from a smuggler's cave. "But we'll talk later. You've lost a considerable amount of blood, but I think you can manage the walk. Just . . . along . . . my place . . . car . . ." He was tuning in and out now; the static was getting worse on the short-wave band. I thought about lying down, but then he was towing me along, and I gave up and followed, trying not to bump my head on my knees. I remember going under dark shrubbery, pushing through a hedge like a barbed-wire entanglement over what felt like dead men's bones but were probably just tree roots. Then I was being helped into the seat of a small, shiny car that looked like something hand-tooled for the king of Siam. It made a sound like a contented cat, did a U-turn on a Kennedy dime and took off straight up. I knew then I was dreaming, so I leaned back into a seat upholstered with clouds and let it all slide away.

2

Voices woke me. For a while I tried to ignore them, but something in the tone of the conversation made me prick up my ears like a patient on the table who hears somebody say "prognosis negative." One of the voices belonged to the little man from the park, a couple of lifetimes ago. The female voice was husky and low—lower than his—with an edge to it like a sawed board. It was saying:

". . . you're a fool to take a risk like this, Jess!"

"Minka, my dear, they have no way of knowing—"

"How do you know what they have? This is Death Control you're playing with now, not some two-cee meat-legger!"

I got an eyelid up and looked at sunlight on a high ceiling with ornate fretwork in gold and white, walls with little dabs of bright-colored tile here and there, a couple of chairs like pastel-toned eggshells perched on slim, shiny rods, and a low table with a silver bowl half the size of a washtub, full of oversized bananas and pears. Past that, there was a row of columns with blue sky showing between them, and beyond the columns a terrace spread out, catching yellow sunlight. The little man was sitting in a violet chair worrying a fingernail. The woman sitting with him was young and shapely. Her hair was a varnished swirl of indigo, like a breaking wave, and there were faint orange spirals drawn on her cheeks, with the ends trailing down under her chin. Her outfit seemed to consist of a lot of colored ribbons, carelessly draped.

"Did he . . . is he . . .?"

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"No—but it doesn't matter—"

"I thought your Secret Society had rules about strangers."

"This is different! They were tracking him! They wanted him alive! Don't you see it?" The small man was waving both arms now. "If *they* want him—*I* want him!"

"*Why* do they want him?"

"I've admitted I don't know—yet. But you may be sure I'll find out. And then . . ."

"Then it's going to fall in on you, Jess! They don't bother with the rats in the dump—until one of them comes out and tries to steal the food off their plates."

Jess brought his hands up and made a clawing motion, as if he were shredding a curtain.

"Don't be a blind grub of a stupid Preke! After all these years, this is a break: The first in my time!"

"Be quiet, Jess. You'll wake him."

"Bah! I've shot him full of enough lethenol to paralyze a platoon of Blackies. . . ." But he got up. I closed my eyes, listened to them come in and cross the floor to me. Neither of them said anything for half a minute.

"Caw, he's big enough," the woman said.

Jess tittered. "I had to strap two lift units to him to get him here."

"Was he badly hurt?"

"Just a nasty cut. I've given him two litres of blood, full spec with nutes."

"Why would they want anyone —*alive*?"

"He must know something. Something important."

"What could he know, that ETORP needs?"

"That's what I have to discover. Will you help me—or do you intend to desert me, now that I need you?"

"If it's what you want—of course I'll do what I can." The girl's voice was dull.

"Good girl. I knew you would. . . ." Their feet went away. Something clicked and the room became very still. I opened my eyes again. I was alone.

I lay there and looked at the fancy ceiling and waited for the memories to come flooding back, but nothing happened. I was still just Steve Dravek, former tough guy, once reputed to be a pretty savvy character but now not even sure what day it was or what continent I was on. Jess had sounded American, and so did the girl, but that didn't prove anything. The park could have been anywhere, and the street. . . . Well, in retrospect the street was a lot like something out of a dream fraught with obscure psychological significance. I wouldn't count the street.

The situation wasn't totally unique: I knew what it was like to wake up a little confused, throbbing a little here and there, with a mouth like an abandoned mouse

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nest and nothing but a set of raw knuckles and a fresh tattoo to help me reconstruct preceding events. But this time I didn't remember the celebration or the cause for the celebration. What I did remember was an office paneled in dark, waxy wood, and a mean-looking old geezer with crew-cut white hair, nodding and saying, "Sure, Steve, if that's the way you want it."

Frazier. The name came slowly, like something remembered from a long time ago.

But what the hell—Frazier was my drinking buddy, a lean, wiry kid with bushy black hair and enough reach to spot most light-heavies ten pounds and a horseshoe. . . .

But he was the old man in the office, too. . . . I shook my head to get rid of the double exposure and did some deep breathing. *Try again, Dravek.*

This time I got a big room like a blimp hangar, full of pipes and noise and sharp, sour smells. Lots of smoke in the air—or mist—and more mist rising from tanks like oversized oxygen bottles.

No help there. Once more.

This time I got a woman's face: high cheekbones, dark eyes big enough to float a yacht in, red-brown hair that came down to slim shoulders, the willowy figure of a thoroughbred . . . but no name; no identity.

Come on, Dravek! You can do better than that: Address, phone number, occupation, last seen on the night of. . . .

Back to that. I turned my head and was looking across the room at a flat black case lying on the table by the door. It looked like a case with something in it.

Sitting up was hard work, but no harder than carrying a safe up a fire escape. The side gave signals, and I felt a warm, wet feeling against my ribs that meant something had ripped a little, but I got my feet on the floor and pushed. I felt as heavy as a lead-lined casket, but I made it across to the table before I had to lie down. When my head cleared, I sat up and went to work on the case.

It was rectangular, about two inches thick, six inches by eight. My finger touched something and the top snicked back. I poked around in the kind of junk women have carted in handbags since Nefertiti's day. There was a long, curved comb, metal tubes of paint, a little box that rattled, some plastic shapes like charms for a charm bracelet, a folded paper that looked like a photostat of a magazine article. I opened it; except for the shorthand spelling, it read like a news item, written in the gushy tones of a fashion hack, all about the new Raped Look and the exciting corpse-colors that were taking the Crust by storm. There was nothing in that for me.

I started to toss it back, but the line of print at the top caught my

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eye. It wasn't much, just a date; Sarday, Ma 33, 2103.

For a minute the floor under my feet, the whole room, the city around me, seemed to turn to a thin gas, something my suppressed id had thought up during one of those long, hard nights just before the fever breaks.

"Twenty-one oh-three," I said. "Ha—that's a good one." I dropped the paper on the floor and looked around at the room. It looked solid enough. There was a cool breeze moving in off the terrace now, and out beyond the columns I could see a couple of friendly-looking clouds. They had a nice familiar look that helped a lot just then.

"That makes next week my birthday," I said, but it didn't come out sounding cute. "My hundred and fifty-sixth . . ."

There wasn't much more I could do with that. I put the stuff back in the handbag and ate a couple of grapes to restore my strength and stretched out on the bed to wait. I listened to the wind flirting around the columns and tried to stay awake, but after a while I dropped off into a restless dream about a big room full of noise and excited faces, and a smaller room with smoke curling out past an open door, and a big tank, painted green. There was a man in a white uniform with blood on his face, and a woman crying, and I was saying, "That's an order, damn your guts!" And then they were all backing away, and I picked up the bundle in my arms and went in through the smoky door and heard behind me the sound of the woman, crying . . .

The sunny blue sky had turned to scarlet and purple before my host came back, humming a little tune between his teeth. The woman was with him. She left after a minute, and I played possum while he thumbed back my eyelid. Then he went across to the wall and got busy poking buttons on a console that swung out on command. He took something out of a slot, held it up to the light and frowned at it, came back over to me and took hold of my arm. That was my signal to take hold of his neck. He squawked and flapped his arms, and the thing in his hand hit the floor. I got my feet under me and stood up; he went for a pocket with one hand, and I shifted grips and took him up against the wall. His eyes goggled at me.

"What have you got that's good for a lethenol hangover, Jess?" I leaned on him and let him get a swallow of air in past my thumb. "Who are you, Jess? What's your racket?"

He tried to bite me. I pounded his head on the wall a few times. All this effort started my head humming again. "You're tough, Jess," I told him. "I'm tougher."

He tried with a finger for the eye, and I knocked him down and

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held him on the floor with a knee in his back and slapped his pockets. I found a couple of scented tissues and some plastic tokens. He said a few things, none of them helpful.

"You're making me curious, Jess," I tried to talk without panting. "It must be important dope you're hanging on to."

"If you'll take your thumb out of my throat so that we can talk together like civilized men," he hissed, "I'll tell you what I can. Otherwise, you may kill me and be damned to you!" I slacked off a little.

"Let's start with who *they* are. The ones who wanted me alive."

"Blackies. Commission men."

"Make it plainer."

"Death Control, damn you! How plain does it have to be?"

"How do you know it's me they want?"

"I heard them talking—in the park."

"So you snatched me out from under their noses. What made me worth taking the chance?"

"I overheard nothing farther than that they had seen you enter the park. By the way, how did you happen to be there?"

"I wandered in off the street. Maybe I was a little drunk."

"How are you feeling now?" He cocked his head as if the answer was worth a lot of money and he didn't want to miss any overtones.

"Like it happened to two other guys. By the way, you wouldn't have a drink around the place?"

He looked at my hand holding his ruffled shirt. "May I?"

I stepped back and he went past me to his alcove with the buttons, punched a couple. He said "ah" and came back with a right-looking glass.

"Better get two."

He followed instructions. I traded glasses, watched him drink half of his, then tried mine. It tasted like perfumed apple juice, but I drank it anyway. Maybe it helped. My head seemed to clear a little. Jess dabbed the blood off his chin with a large tissue.

"You're a stranger here in the city," he said, making it casual. "Where do you come from?"

"Well, Jess, I have a little problem there. I don't exactly remember how I got to your town. I was hoping you might tell me."

He looked solemn and alert, like a sympathetic judge just before he hits you with the book. "I?"

"Our gentlemanly arrangement isn't going to work out unless you play too, Jess."

"Really, you're asking the impossible," he said. "What would I know of you—a perfect stranger?"

I banged my glass on the table and leaned over and put my face an inch from his. "Try a guess," I said.

He looked me in the eye. "Very well," he said. "You're an ice case, illegally out of low-O."

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I pushed back in the chair. "What's that mean?"

"For the past hundred years or more," he said, "your body has been in an ETORP cryothesis vault—frozen solid at absolute zero."

3

Half an hour later, Jess was still talking.

". . . presumably you were placed in cold stasis by relatives. You were ill, with a then-incurable ailment—or injured in an accident. The hope was that in time a cure would be found, and you'd be awakened. Of course, that was an error. The dead stay dead. ETORP owns them now."

"I was never sick a day in my life. Outside of that, it sounds like a good story."

Jess shook his head. "The difficulty is that there hasn't been an authorized thaw for over fifty years, to my knowledge. And if you'd been revived under official sanction, you'd have awakened in an ETORP doc ward, with a cephalotaper clamped to your skull, pumping you full of a canned ETORP briefing, not wandering the streets in an amnesiac condition."

"Maybe a friend did the job."

"A friend—of a corpse who's been on ice for a century? Not even your own great-great grandchildren would know anything of you—and if they did—would they give up their own visas for you?" Jess wagged his head. "And in any event, laws have been passed. We can't have the dead waking up; there's no room for them, with a world population of twenty billion. And they cite the legal complications, hold up the spectre of old diseases released. They make a good case, but the real reason is . . ." he looked at me, watching for my reactions. "Spare parts."

"Go on."

"Consider it!" He leaned toward me, slitted his eyes. "Perfectly good arms and legs and kidneys, going to waste—and outside—people needing them, dying for want of them! They're ready to pay ETORP's price, perform any service in return for life and health!"

"What's this ETORP?"

"Eternity, Incorporated."

"Sounds like a cemetery."

"A . . .?"

"Where you bury the dead ones."

"The Blackies would gather you in for a trick like that." He sounded a little indignant. "The minerals are valuable, even if the hulk is useless."

"You were telling me about ETORP."

"ETORP controls the most precious commodity of all: life. It issues birth permits and life visas, performs transplants and cosmetic surgery, supplies rejuve and longevity treatments and drugs. Technically, it's a private corporation, operating under the Public Constitution. In fact, it rules our society."

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"What about the government?"

"Pah! A withered organ, dangling anachronistically from the body politic. What power is there that compares with life? Money? Military force? What are they to a dying man?"

"Nice business. How did ETORP get the monopoly?"

"The company began simply enough, with patented drugs and techniques, invented in their own laboratories and closely controlled. Then they developed the frozen organ banks; then whole-body cryothesis. After that, ETORP's power burgeoned at geometric rates. It bought and sold legislators like poker chips. It became a tyrant that ruled with a whip in one hand and a sweet in the other! And all the while, its vaults were filling with freeze cases, waiting for a resurrection that would never come."

"So old Uncle Elmer never woke up after all. . . ."

"So sad," Jess said. "All those trusting souls, saying goodbye, kissing their children and wives and going off to the hospital, leaving pitiful little notes to be opened on anniversaries, going under the anesthetic babbling of the parties they'd stage when they came back . . . and now—a century later—sawed apart to be sold from open stock to the lucky ones with negotiable skills, or handed out as door prizes to faithful company hacks. And bodies! Whole bodies, an almost unlimited supply, something that had never been plentiful. That was where the power was, Steve—that was what made ETORP! What was a billion dollars to a ninety-year old mummy in a wheelchair? He'd pay it all to have his brain transferred to a twenty-year old body—possibly keeping a million or two in reserve for a new stake."

"OK, so I'm wanted by the law for illegally rising from the dead. Where does that leave us? Who thawed me? And why?"

Jess thought about it for three puffs of his dope stick. "Steve—how old were you—Are you?"

I felt the question over in my mind. I had the feeling the answer was on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't quite pin it down. "About fifty," I said. "Middle-aged."

Jess got up and went across to a table, came back with a hand mirror with an ivory handle.

"Look at yourself."

It was a good glass, nine inches square. It showed me a face that was mine, all right, but the hairline was an inch lower on the forehead than it should have been, and the lines I'd collected in a lot of years of trying to pound the world into submission with my head were gone like the shine on five dollar shoes. I looked like a new recruit for the Freshman grid squad—turned down for underage.

"Tell me about yourself, Steve," Jess said. "Anything at all. Start at

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the beginning—your earliest memories."

I rubbed the side of my face and tried to think about it, but the ideas that should have been ready to jump into my mind felt rusty and old, as if I hadn't thought about them, hadn't used the words, for a long, long time.

"I was kicked up in a tough part of Philly, went to sea, joined the army when the Chicoms busted loose in Burma. After the war I went to school, got enough education to start in as a white-collar man with a grocery chain. Five years later, I owned the company . . ." I listened to myself talking, remembering it all in a vague, academic sort of way, as if it were something I saw in the movies.

"Go on."

"The office, the plant. A big car with two telephones." Shadowy memories were taking shape. There was something dark there I didn't like.

"Tell me about your business associates."

I thought about it, tried to sort out the conflicting impressions. A young fellow with black hair, an old bird with a neck like a turkey. . . .

"My best pal was a fellow I served with in China and Nepal. He saved my life once, plugged the hole in my wrist where a Chink .25 mm went through." I remembered it all: The two-mile walk back to the forward aid station, handling the AR left-handed while the woods buzzed with scatter-shell fragments; the surgeons clucking like hens and then settling down to three hours of needlework that would have won prizes at the county fair, while Frazier poured slugs for both of us and kept my cigar lit. They'd done a nice job of putting nerves and blood vessels back together, but the carpal joint was never the same, and there was an inch-wide scar that was the reason I'd taken to wearing my watch on my left wrist. . . . I had a sudden idea, one that had been ducking around the edge of my consciousness, flapping its arms for attention ever since I woke up in the rain.

I flipped my cuff back and looked at the wrist. The skin was as unflawed as a chorus girl's hip.

"What is it?" Jess was watching my face. I turned the cuff back.

"Nothing. Just another little slip in my grip on reality. What would you say to another shot of what we just had?"

He watched me while I poured out a nice jolt. I took it back without bothering to roll it on my tongue.

"This freezing process," I said. "Does it remove scars?"

"Why, no—"

"Does it make you look younger?"

"Nothing of that sort, Steve—"

"Then scratch your theory."

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"What do you mean?"

"If I were one of your freeze cases, I'd remember a brick wall running at me, or a sick bed and a flock of medicine bottles and some old goat shaking his whiskers and saying, 'ice this boy until I figure out what to do next.' "

Jess pushed his lips in and out. "It's quite possible that the trauma associated with the shock—"

"It wasn't an accident, no scars, remember? And if I had a fatal ailment—who cured it?"

He looked a little nervous. "Perhaps you weren't cured."

"Relax, cancer's not catching."

"Steve—this is no joking matter! We have to find out who you are, what you know that makes you a threat to ETORP!"

"I'm no threat. I'm just a mixed-up guy who wants to get unmixed and back to minding my own business."

"They're afraid of you! Nothing else could explain a class Y search for you—and therein lies a weapon to be used against them!"

"If you're talking revolution, count me out."

"Count you out—on the quest for the greatest prize the world has ever known?"

"What are you dancing around the edge of, Jess?"

His eyes went to slits with a glint back of them like Midas thinking about Fort Knox.

"Immortality."

Just then, as if it had been waiting for the signal, a cool chime cut through the still of the evening.

Jess came out of his chair like a cocky fetherweight answering the bell for round two. All his teeth were showing in a grin that had no humor in it. The tone sounded again, twice, three times.

"Minka?" Jess asked the air.

The chime stopped and somebody pounded on the door.

"Just like old times," I said. "That sounds like coppers to me, Jess."

"How could they . . .?" he started and then closed his mouth. He gave me a narrow-eyed look.

"You can trust me now," he said, "or not, just as you please. Neither of us wants you found here. There's one way out for us."

"What have you got in mind?"

"Out there." He pointed to the terrace. "I'll give them something to think about. What you do is up to you." He didn't wait to catch my reaction, just started across toward the door. That left me a couple of seconds to think it over. I looked around, saw three blank walls and the columns leading to the terrace. I went out, stood in the shadows.

Jess opened the door—and was backing into the room, holding his hands out from his sides. A man was pushing him, and another was behind, looking as happy as his kind of face could. They were lean, slim-hipped lads, buckled into black uniforms with silver cord

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down the pants seams and more silver worked into their stiff stand-up collars. They wore holsters strapped down low, in working position, and their eyes had that screw-you-Jack look that spelled cop or professional soldier as far as you could hear a pair of heels click.

"Say all the right things," one of them said in a filed-steel voice, "and you could live to cash in your chits."

"What's all this?" Jess sounded a little breathless. "My visa is in order—"

The cop back-handed him down onto the floor.

"Topside wants you bad," the cop nodded. "I guess this is the first clean spring from the Palace in sixty years. Now, let's have it all: How you handled the outer ring, how you took the main vault, who did the thaw job—the works."

Jess was sitting up, looking tearful. "You're making a mistake—"

The Blackie hit him. Jess curled up on the rug and made noises like a lonely pup.

"Start now and save muscle all around," the Blackie said. "Who was your first contact?"

Jess looked up at him. "He was a big fellow, about seven three, with chin whiskers and a glass eye," he said in a nasty tone. "I didn't get the name."

"Funny man." The Blackie swung his foot and caught Jess in the shoulder as he rolled away. The other cop kicked him back.

"Where's the other one?"

They fanned out and looked at the bare walls. One of them blew air out over his lower lip and looked at the other one. I could almost hear his brains working: If there were two guys in a locked room and only one in sight, how many are still hiding under the rug?

"I don't like it, Supe," the number two cop was saying. "We should have called this one into HQ, shouldn't have played wise with a Y priority."

"There's twenty year chits in it for the ones that take him solo . . ."

I eased an eye past the edge of the open door. Jess was on his feet. What was holding him there was the boss Blackie. He was standing with his back to me. He had his legs planted well apart and was holding a handful of Jess's pretty green shirt in his left fist and bending him backwards over the table. There was a lot of blood on the little man's face, and one eye was swollen almost shut. The other cop was leaning against the wall to the right. If he had moved his eyes an eighth of an inch, he'd have been looking straight at me.

"We got all night," the cop said. "Tell it now or tell it in an hour, we don't care. We like our work."

Jess mumbled something, but I wasn't paying much attention to the conversation. What I was watching was Jess's right hand. It

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was feeling over the table, out of sight of the other cop. The fingers worked carefully, deliberately, as though they had all the time in the world. They teased the drawer open, came out with the tip of a thin blade between them. The fingers worked the knife around until they could touch the narrow black-taped grip, closed over it. Jess's arm came up slowly, carefully, poised for a moment with the needle-tip just touching the black cloth stretched over the ribs of the man bending over him. Then with a smooth thrust, he put it in.

The Blackie jerked once, as if he had touched something hot. He pivoted slowly, still holding Jess.

"What are you doing?" His partner took a step toward him, and I was into the room and behind him. I hit him in the neck, twice, and he dropped his gun and jackknifed to the floor across his boss and lay twisted, the way they do when the spine is shattered.

I kicked the gun across the room, and Jess staggered away from the table, breathing with a lot of noise.

"They came alone," Jess gasped. "They were keeping the play to themselves. Nice for us, Steve. No one knows where they were." He made a face and I saw he was grinning.

"You're a great actor," I said. "What do you do for an encore?"

"We make a good team," he said. "A pity to break it up."

I went over to the bar and poured myself a stiff one and swallowed it.

"Let's put this pair in the back closet," I said. "Then get a map of New York City, circa 1975. I think I may have an idea."

The map on the tabletop screen showed the eastern half of the state plus a chunk of Pennsylvania and Jersey. The highway grid looked a lot denser than it should have, but otherwise it was pretty normal. The date in the corner was 1992.

"Higher mag," I said, and he focused down until the city filled the screen. I asked him to center it on Long Island, the Jamaica section, and he worked the knobs and got a blowup that showed every street and major building.

"There was a bar called the Blue Bull," I told Jess. "I stood a lady up there one night. I told her I'd gotten hold of a pair of hot dice at Forian's and won a couple of grand —twenty-two hundred bucks, I said. She agreed to be agreeable about it if I gave her half. Served me right for lying. The real reason I was late was here." I showed him the spot. "My old plant. I was installing a special lock-box there that night. My little secret."

"And you imagine that would be intact today? The building it was in probably doesn't exist—"

"It wasn't exactly in a building, Jess. It was under one—in a place that was built to last. I made some arrangements for that."

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He poked a lever. A red spot popped up at the top of the screen, and he used two knobs to guide it down to mark the plant. Then he blanked the screen, and a new map came onto it. It looked like one of those webs built by a drunk spider. There were cryptic symbols all over it like Chinese alphabet soup. The red dot was still there. Jess looked up at me.

"Interesting spot you've picked," he said.

"Tell me about it."

"This is a cartogram of Granyauck, overlaying the site of the town you used to know. As you'll notice, the former islands have been joined to the mainland by various hydraulic works. The section you call Long Island, here . . ." he pointed to a green blob that covered a piece of the screen—"is an ETORP reserve. The specific point in which you expressed an interest happens to coincide almost precisely with the most closely guarded premises in the North American Sector."

"What is it?"

"The Cryothesis Center," he said. "Vulgarly known as the Ice Palace."

4

We waited three days to make our move; my side was still tender, but Jess's medicine had healed the wound to a thin scar.

He fitted me out with a set of shiny black long johns that turned out to be lightweight scuba gear and led the way by back routes down into the depths of the city to a high blank wall with lights far up on it and that grim look that prisons and military installations always seem to have.

"This is the outer perimeter wall of the reserve," Jess said. "Come along."

I trailed him to the end of the alley and a chest-high wall with lots of dark, cold air beyond it and black water swirling twenty feet below.

"A pleasant evening for a swim," Jess said. He pulled off his jacket and produced a slim-barreled gun from somewhere and made clicking sounds with it, checking the action. I stripped down to my wetsuit and turned up the heat control a notch higher. Jess looked me over to be sure I hadn't left my seat flap hanging down, and vaulted up on the coping of the wall, agile as a squirrel.

"Stay clear of the rungs when you dive," he said. "And be sure to keep your comset open. Its range is only about a hundred feet, under water." He gave me a casual wave, like a movie star dismissing a fan, and tilted over the edge. I hopped up on the wall, swung both legs over, and kicked off without looking, feet first.

It seemed like a long fall before I hit water as hard as a sidewalk and felt myself tumbling in a

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strong current that sucked the heat out of me like a blotter. I straightened myself out facing upstream and looked for Jess. It was like swimming in an inkwell. I found my heat control and thumbed it up, then tried my water jets.

"Use more power," Jess's voice tinned very faintly in my left ear. "Steer for the lights."

I saw a greenish arc glowing off to my right that turned out to be the open mouth of a six-foot conduit. There were some symbols painted on it in luminous pink and a mechanism bolted to the side. Jess was perched on the housing, tinkering. I heard him say "ah," the louvers that blocked the mouth pivoted, and I could see light coming from inside the duct. Water was boiling out of it like a millrace. We headed in, using the hand-rungs; the miniature pump strapped to my back hummed, and the straps sawed under my arms, but I moved ahead. We passed up a pair of side-branches and the duct narrowed. There was a glow-strip along the side here, with more symbols. Jess checked each one we came to, after a while held up and said, "There should be a hatch here."

I flattened myself against the curved wall while he checked over the section ahead. Then his head and shoulders disappeared. I came up beside him and his legs went up inside a vertical shaft a yard in diameter. There were rungs there. I hauled myself up after him, and after ten feet, the shaft angled, and we came out of water into open air.

"I suppose this is a maintenance lock," Jess said. It was a square room, twenty feet on a side, with motor-operated valves all over one wall and color-coded piping on the other ones. I could hear pumps throbbing somewhere. The ceiling shed a glow like phosphorescent mold on Jess's face. In the tight black suit, he looked like a detail from Hieronymous Bosch.

I was looking at a panel set between banked valves.

"Try this," I said.

Jess unclipped a tool kit from his belt and went to work. Five minutes later something beyond the wall made a solid *snick.*

"That's it," he said.

I went past him and pushed on the panel. A section of wall slid back, and I was looking into a silent corridor with a row of green ceiling lights that stretched away into the distance.

"So much for the impregnability of ETORP," Jess said. "We're inside the Ice Palace. There are a thousand Blackies patrolling a few feet overhead, but we seem to have this level to ourselves. Now what?"

I didn't answer him right away. I was looking at the corridor, and feeling little icy fingers running up my backbone.

"Did you ever walk into a strange place and have the feeling you'd

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been there before?" I spoke carefully, so as not to shatter a fragile thought.

"It's called *deja vu*," Jess's whisper echoed.

"There's something down there," I said. "Something I won't like."

"What is it, Steve?" Jess's voice was like a freezing man breathing on the dying spark of his last match.

"I don't know," I said. "It's gone." I looked along the hall, but it was just a hall now. I pointed toward the far end.

"Come on, Jess," I said. "I don't know whether it's a hunch or a nightmare, but I think what we want is that way."

The corridor ran for a couple of hundred feet and ended in a right-angled turn with a cubbyhole full of shelves. There was nothing on them but dust. Under the shelves there was a row of hooks designed for coats, but no coats were hanging on them. Jess stamped on the floor, looked at the ceiling.

"There must be a route leading from here," he said. "This appears to be a dressing room, where special protective clothing was donned."

I was looking at the hooks. Something about them bothered me. I counted them. Twelve. I got a grip on the third from the right and pulled down. It felt pretty solid. I pushed up hard, and it clicked and folded back. Jess was watching me with his mouth open. I fingered the next one, then took hold of the fifth in line, flipped it up. I could feel a little sweat on my forehead under the mask. I reached for the hanger between the other two and lifted it. Something made a crunching sound, and the wall on the right jumped open half an inch.

"How did you know, Steve?" Jess's voice was as delicate as a surgeon's scalpel, with the same kind of edge.

"I don't know," I said, and pushing the door open, I walked through into a place I'd seen somewhere, a long time ago, in a dream of another life.

It was a wide room with walls that were cracked and water stained, with green mold growing in little tufts along the cracks. There were cracks across the floor, too, and some curled chips of perished plastic were all that was left of the composition tiles. I saw this by the light of a small hand flash that Jess played over the floor and held on a door across the room.

I went to it and turned the old-fashioned doorknob and went into a small office drifted half an inch deep in dust and scraps of paper as brown as autumn leaves. There was a collapsed jumble of leather scraps and rusted springs in one corner, behind a teakwood desk. There was a small bowl on the desk with a little dust at the bottom, and a shred of something that might have been a flower stem, once.

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"Daisies," I said. "White daisies."

"Steve, do you know this place?" Jess whispered.

"It's my old plant," I said. "This was my office."

I went to the desk, opened the drawer and took out a bottle. A scrap of lable read EMY ARTIN.

"What else do you remember, Steve?"

I was looking at a picture frame hanging on the wall. The glass was dirty but intact, but there was nothing behind it but a little ash. I lifted it down and uncovered a steel plate with a round knob, set in the wall. It was a safe, and the door was ajar.

"Someone's been here before you," Jess's voice grated.

I reached far back in the safe and felt over the upper surface, found a pinhole. "I need a wire," I said. Jess checked a pouch at his belt and produced one. I poked it up in the hole where it snicked, and the back of the safe tilted forward into my hand. There was a drawer behind it. I pulled it out. Except for a few flakes of dry black paint, it was empty.

"What did you expect to find here?" Jess asked me.

"I don't know." I blew into the empty steel box, and the paint chips danced and whirled up into my face. I started to toss it aside and found myself looking at the bottom of the drawer. The paint there was dry, peeling.

"What is it?" Jess was watching my face.

"There was no paint on the inside," I said. "It's black Carboloy. . . ." I picked at the paint with a fingernail. More of it flaked away, and I was looking at words etched in the hard metal: IN THE SEALED WING.

. . . Frazier was looking at me with the kind of look you give a dog that's been run over. Gatley was standing behind him and Smith and Jacobs and a couple of men from the maintenance shop.

"Follow your orders, damn you!" I was yelling, and the blood was thudding in my temples like nine-pound sledges. "I told you to wall it off, and by God, I meant I wanted it walled off! I never want sunlight to shine in there again!"

"We all know how you feel, Steve," Frazier was saying. "But there's no use—"

Hobart pushed up beside him and his fat face came open and said, "Look here, Dravek, we have fifty thousand dollars invested in this project—"

I swung on him, and somebody tried for my arms from behind, and I broke his leg. Then they were all backed against the wall in a bunch, all but Frazier, who was always the only one with the guts to face me.

"He's gone crazy!" Hobart was yelling, and Frazier was looking me in the eye and saying, "All

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right, Steve, if that's what you want. . . ."

"Do you know what it means?" It seemed like a long time had passed, but Jess was still standing beside me with the light in his hand, and I was holding the box. I tossed it on the floor, and the clatter was muffled in the dust.

"Yeah," I said. "I know." I went back out into the outer room. The egg-crate ceiling was a dark tapestry of sooty spider webs, and the walls that had been a soft tan were blackish green, but I knew the way now. On the far side a door was set in an alcove beside a rusty pipe pushing up from the rotted casing of a water cooler. It squeaked and opened, and Jess's light showed us another room, full of dust and age and piles of shapeless debris where chairs and tables had been.

"Waiting room," I said. "Receptionist's desk over there." I went past the jumble of rusted-out metal and along a hall where dust came up in clouds, through a pair of doors that fell off their hinges when I kicked them and down steps to a pair of rusted steel doors that were standing open on a broken wall of masonry. Jess came up beside me and put the light inside, where it made long shadows in a wide, high room, with piping and fallen scaffolding along one wall and a half-completed framework of steel plating looming up in the background like a wrecked tanker. There was a lot of dust here, too, and a faint rotten smell in the air.

"What was it all for?" Jess asked. "What sort of work did you do here?"

"We were a food packaging and processing outfit. The big tank was part of a new process we developed."

"Why wasn't it completed?"

"I don't remember."

Jess played the light around some more and held it on the floor. Footprints in the dust led toward the far wall. They skirted a coil of heavy cable with cracked insulation, went on into shadows. I stepped off, following the trail, and Jess came behind, lighting the way.

On the other side of the big unfinished tank there was a deep bay with a railed gallery. I went up the companionway, along past open-sided cubicles with stainless steel tubs, still bright under the dust. The footprints turned in at the last bay. I stepped inside, ducked under the low hood, and stopped that way, bent over, looking through a framed opening that had been made by tearing out a wall. The light made complicated shadows across a room full of machinery as complex as the inside of a nuclear power station. Cables and tubes and pipes led from the apparatus to a ten-foot tank like an iron lung. A hatch at one end of the

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tank was standing open. I could see something inside, something that took hold of my guts like a giant bird's claw and squeezed. I reached and swung the door back. The thing inside glided out on a white porcelain slab, and I was looking down at a dead man's face, dry and brown as carved wood, with shaggy, dry hair, sandy brown, and a glint of teeth showing at the edge of the withered lips.

5

The body was nothing but purplish brown leather stretched over bones. There were a couple of dozen tiny wounds visible on the skin.

"This is a life-support tank," Jess said. "It's been sabotaged. See the broken wires?"

"This is just a kid," I said. "Not more than sixteen years old. The hair's long, but there's no sign of a beard."

"He appears to have dessicated perfectly in the sterile atmosphere."

"The guy that sent us here didn't do it just to show us this," I said. "There's got to be more. Give me a hand."

I took hold of the right arm; it felt as hard and dry as last year's corn husks, and about as heavy. There was nothing under the cadaver except a blackish stain on the porcelain.

Jess played the light inside the tank, showed up a tangle of conduits and wires. The body was on its back, one leg drawn up a little, the arms at the sides, the fists closed. One fist looked a little different than the other. I bent over and looked.

"He's got something in his hand," I said. I broke off one of the fingers getting it out. It was a metal tube three inches long, half an inch in diameter. There was a screw cap at one end. I twisted it off and pulled out tightly rolled papers.

I unrolled them and a couple of faded newspaper clippings slid out into my hand. I smoothed the top one out and read it:

"Police today continued their investigation into the mystery surrounding the discovery of an unindentified body in a midtown hotel late yesterday. Although the apparent cause of death was suicide from a small-caliber gas gun, a small wound in the roof of the mouth indicated possible foul play. The victim, apparently in his late thirties, was dressed in the uniform of a Major of UN Constabulary. UN Headquarters has so far declined to comment. (IP)"

The next one was a bigger spread, two long columns in small, crabbed type that had a familiar look. The headline read: MAN GUNNED IN DAYLIGHT MURDER. The story under it told that just before press

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time a grey Monojag had pulled up to the taxi entrance to the Waldorf, and a man in the back seat had poked a 6mm Bren gun out the window and fired a full clip into a man in a brown overcoat coming out the revolving door. An employee of the hotel had been slightly injured in the knee by a ricochet. Examination of the body failed to produce any indication of the identity of the murdered man. The Monojag had driven off and made good its escape. Police were following up several clues and expected to make an arrest at any moment.

I handed the clip to Jess and another one dropped. I picked it up and was looking at a picture of myself.

It wasn't a bad likeness, except that it showed a little more hair than seemed just right, and there was a small scar high on the right cheekbone that didn't look familiar. And there was something wrong with the expression. But the part that hit my nervous system like a fire hose full of ice water was the caption: BODY IGNORED BY PASSENGERS

The lines below read: "Civil Peace Under-Commissioner Arkwright announced today that record search has so far failed to identify the visaless body discovered late yesterday in Mid-city Tube Central. The corpse, which had been ignored for several hours by Tube patrons who assumed the man was sleeping, is thought to be that of a criminal sought by Peace authorities for violation of the Life Act. (See story, page 115.)"

"What is it?" I said. "A gag, or a fake, or just a little slip in the editorial department?"

Jess was reading the clip. He didn't answer. I looked at the picture again. It was I, all right, and something about it bothered me . . . "Hey," I said. "This is no fake. The guy in the picture was dead when they took it, all right."

Jess glanced at the photo. "Why do you say that?"

"You prop the body up, get the eyelids open and set the lights to give you a little reflection off the eyeballs, tuck the tongue back inside and run a comb through the hair. It looks OK—unless you know what to look for. The Chicoms used to use the same trick to keep the Red Cross happy about the prisoners."

"Horrible. Still, since he was dead when they found him, I suppose it's understandable."

"Maybe I'm a little slow. Back where I come from, a fellow doesn't often get a look at his own obituary."

Jess gave me his pained look. "You talk as if you imagine that is a picture of yourself."

"Imagine, hell. I know a picture of me when I see it."

"The coincidence in appearance *is* rather striking—

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"The clip could refer to a relative of yours. Perhaps it's a vendetta—a rather fantastic vendetta, I confess—"

"It's a swell theory," I cut him off. "Except that I don't know anything about a feud, and I never had a twin."

"You had a grandfather."

"Make that a little plainer."

"Take another look at the date on the clip," he said. "It's over sixty years old."

My face felt like something chipped out of ice, but I pushed it into a grin.

"That clears that up. I'm not a fresh corpse on a slab down at the city morgue; I'm a nice settled cadaver who's been pushing up daisies for the bigger half of a century."

Jess nodded as if that meant something. Maybe it did. I was still hanging in the air feeling for the floor with my toes. There was another paper back of the clips. Jess put the light on it while I unrolled it. It was covered with typing. I smoothed it out on the side of the tank and read it:

"What I'm going to try may not work, and if it doesn't, I'll wind up like the major and this poor kid here who never even had a name. But it's what I have to do. Maybe I'm wasting my time writing a long chatty letter to a guy who doesn't exist, never will exist. But I'm banking on it that I'm not the last. OK, you read the note number three left, and came here, just like I did. The box was empty when I found it, too, but his tip to try the sealed wing was there. The paint I put back over it won't last more than ten years, and that ought to be long enough.

"To hell with that. Let's keep this short. I've got plenty of time, my trail's covered and cold, maybe he thinks I'm dead. I tried hard enough to make him think so. Five years I've laid doggo now. But now it's time to move. Can't stall forever. Because I found it.

"Just on the off chance something goes wrong, I'm leaving this for you. If anybody else finds, this it's got to be him, and what good is a code with him? You'll know what to do. And if you don't, you've forgotten too much —or never got it—

"It's too complicated for me. Things moved fast after my day. We would have called it magic, and maybe it is. Black magic. Bad magic. But part of it's a fairy tale. I make a lousy prince, but I have to try.

"Funny, when you read this you'll know I didn't make it; but here it is: MUSKY LAKE. Third, fifth, fourth. 247.

"Now it's up to you. I'm going to put this in a place that will remind you what he's turned into, what he did to this poor kid, and left here for us to find. I'll give it to him to pass to you.

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"Good luck."

"It's in Wisconsin, a few miles out of a little place called Octavie," I said. "A lake, about half a mile across, in a high valley with pine woods backing up the slopes all around. The name on the map was Otter Lake, but I always thought of it as Musky Lake. That's where I caught my first one."

Jess looked blank.

"A fish, a big one, a fighter. I took him on a ten-pound fly line. It's a thing you don't forget."

"That area is heavily wooded, a desolation," Jess said. "Why would he send you there?"

"I guess that's what we have to find out," I said, and stopped, listening for a sound off to the left, back in what had been a freight loading bay—or maybe I just smelled something wrong. I grabbed Jess's shoulder and just had time to say "Douse the light" before there was a smash of sound, and a blue-white glare lit up the room like an operating theater, and men in black were coming through double doors that were swung back wide from the old freight platform. The spot we stood in was still in deep shadow that narrowed in on us as a big dolly-mounted light came through the doors. I ducked, felt over the floor, came up with a ragged piece of steel plate the size of my hand. There was a nice zone of shadow cast by a column that widened out in the direction of the gallery. I leaned over and threw the piece of plate high and hard, right down the strip of shadow. It made a hell of a clatter when it hit. The light swung offside, and we ducked out and ran for it.

Jess took the lead. He reached the broken brick wall and went flat against it and had his gun out, firing. I took it in a running dive, got back to the opening in time to grab Jess by the collar, but something boomed in the room behind him. His face spasmed, and he came through and fell against me, and we went down together. Blood was pumping from a wound in his back I couldn't have covered with my hand.

I slung him over my shoulder and ran up the three steps, kicked through the burned metal door, put my head down and sprinted. I made it to the far end and got the door to the receptionist's room open when a gun roared behind me and slugs kicked chunks out of the frame. The only light was a faint glow like moonlight from the ceiling strips. I crossed the room in three jumps, and my foot hit something under the dust layer, and I went down with Jess on top of me. I grabbed him by the belt and pitched him into the office behind me, dived after him. Maybe my feet cleared the door before the Blackie slammed into the room.

For a second or two there was

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a silence like the one just after you pull the grenade pin. Then a heavy gun racketed outside the door, one of those high-speed jobs that sprays out slugs like a firehose. The back of the door over me blew off in a hail of plastic splinters. I hugged the floor and heard him come across. I set myself. The door banged and he was through, bringing the gun around, and I grabbed his ankle, but he arced backward and fell across Jess, kicking like a bass hooked in the eye. I caught his gun before it hit the floor and swung to see Jess's grin fade and his face set and the knife in his hand fell in the dust, with Blackie blood on the blade.

I backed through the outer office, trying to look two ways at once and heard a soft sound and got the gun around in time to blow the face off a Blackie coming in from the hall. I got in the doorway, put another burst out through it and went flat as slugs chewed up the doorframe above my head. I came up and out swiveling the gun and got off part of a burst before the Blackie who had been waiting for me blew the gun out of my hands. The impact of the slugs knocked me back against the wall. I saw blood on my sleeve, and I could tell I'd been hit in the body, but there was no pain, just a numbness spreading from the left side of my belly. I wedged myself against the door frame and watched him come across to me. He swung the gun over his shoulder by its strap and reached for me. I slid a hand in under the wrist and grabbed him and brought him in close and turned him and locked my forearm across his throat and broke up everything in there. I threw him away from me and waded across to the open panel and through it and got it closed behind me, and ran, cradling my belly with both arms.

I could hear the big generator pulling hard, and the sparks fountained out, and Frazier was yelling, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. I was watching the two-inch strip of cherry red weld stitching another plate into what was going to be a million dollar setup. Million, hell, a hundred million, over the next ten years! Nobody could match Frazier when it came to tech management. He had a nose for that kind of talent that could comb a potential genius out of a crowd of downy-cheeked grads quicker than I could spot a shaved ace in a set of bicycles. The new process was going to turn the food-processing racket on its ear, and Draco, Inc. would be sole proprietor. . . .

Frazier was still there, hauling at my arm and pointing across the room. The outer door was open, a white glare against the dark, and I could see them silhouetted in it for a second before it closed behind them and they were coming

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down into the big room. I waved and started that way. Something up above shifted and sparks hissed and somebody yelled and the garish flicker of the big welding torch cut out. Frazier waved his arms and went over that way. Somebody was yelling: ". . . . it's hot! Get that plate clear, Brownie! Nulty, shut her down! All the way down!"

I walked over toward where a section of plate had dropped and sliced into the big cables ten feet from the side of the welder. There was a lot of smoke and a stench like burnt cork. I got a couple of choice phrases ready for the framer who'd let it happen, and something made me turn. She was there, right in the thick of the smoke, holding something up in her hand, and I yelled and started toward her and saw her turn toward the sound of my voice . . .

I was on the floor with my face against cold stone, and the churn of the generator was a deep throbbing coming through the floor. I got my head up and was looking at the open mouth of a manhole. There was a black tool case lying beside it. It was Jess's. He'd left it there, after he'd used it to unlock the outer door. I was in the maintenance room above the big duct, and the rumbling noise was the pumps down below. I didn't remember how I'd gotten there.

I made a move to sit up, but a big hook I'd forgotten about came down and ripped into my belly. I curled over it and rode the current of fire for a while; then I got a hand on the edge of the manhole and pulled. I could see a black glint down below. One more pull, Dravek, you can do it. One arm wasn't helping much, but who needs two arms? I used the good knee and felt my chest go over the edge. I was sliding down and then falling into soft black that closed over me. . . .

The shock brought me out of it. For a while—maybe a few seconds, maybe longer—I rolled with the turbulence. Then I slammed something hard, and pain went clear through me from the top of my head to the end of my toes. All of a sudden I knew I was in the duct, being carried along by the high-pressure stream, with my head banging the walls at regular intervals. I felt the duct widen, and I remembered the louvers ahead and got a hand on the water jets and pointed myself upstream and gave them a blast. I slammed the louvers hard, hung up there for a second or two—then slid between them and was out in the deep river, rolling end over end.

The cold was cutting through the suit. I groped a little and thumbed the heat control up some, but not too much, because a little low-temperature anesthesia was a good idea right then.

While I was doing all this, the

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river was taking me along to wherever it was going. I got my head pointed upstream again and used my jets and steered for the right side of the channel. It wasn't easy to maneuver, because one leg seemed to be dead from the hip down, and the left arm had something wrong with it. The fire in my belly didn't seem important right then. I figured I'd get to think about it plenty, later, if there was a later.

A lot of time passed while the water churned past my head like Niagara, and bubbles boiled away around my legs. Then I hit the side wall, slimy with whatever it is that grows on rocks in dirty water. I used the jets and edged forward and found an iron rung and held on.

I had one good leg, another one that felt like a quarter of beef strapped to my hip, and about an arm and a half. I got an overhead grip and pulled up and got a toe on a rung and hooked the thumb of the bad hand over the rung in front of my face and reached for the next one and made another foot. This went on for a long time. Two or three times I forgot what I was doing and started to slide back, but each time an instinct that used to keep monkeys from falling out of trees made my hand grab and hold on.

I reached the top, felt over some wet stone, and got a grip with a fingernail and hauled the legs up over the edge, which was no harder than swinging a piano in my teeth, and fell a couple of feet. That put me where I'd been trying to get: on my back in an empty street, with about four slugs in me and cops looking for me, wanting to finish the job.

I crawled over to the nearest wall and lay against it and tried to check myself over. The trouble with the arm seemed to be due to a hole I could stick the end of my little finger in, just below the elbow. The leg was a little more complicated. The hip was broken up, but there was no wound on the outside; the suit was intact. That meant the slug had gone in through the belly and hit the pelvic bone from the inside. I got my hand inside the suit just far enough to feel what I knew was there, and passed out cold.

When I came out of that one, I was lying on my side kissing cold pavement and watching a figure ducking along in the shadows cast by a light on a tall pole far up the street. I thought about reaching for the little gadget Jess had told me was a reliable short range killer, but nothing happened. I was part of the stone, just an eye peering back from that last thin edge and watching the show.

He went into a shadow that was too black to see through and came out, closer, and skittered across the street to my side and came along to me and stopped and

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looked both ways before he looked down. I started to open my mouth to give him my usual cheery greeting, but the face swelled up and spread until it blanked out the light. I gave it all up and let the darkness take me.

6

I woke up in a bed, propped up like a show corpse in an undertaker's window, blinking across at a room with a lot of flowery gauze curtains, pale yellow velvet drapes pulled back from floor-to-ceiling glass, a tangerine rug with a nap deep enough to go on safari in, a couple of small paintings that were swirls of pink and orange and burnt umber, a few sticks of furniture that looked as if they would disappear if you pushed the right button.

The girl called Minka was sitting in one of the chairs. She looked better minus the orange paint and the blue hair and the ribbons. There was a filmy toga-like wrap around her now, that showed off her figure better than a shower bath. Her hair was a soft brown, and her mouth looked soft and young without the paint. I opened my mouth to say hello and a grunt came out. She looked up.

"How is it?" Her voice was soft, like somebody who's been there herself.

"A little confused," I said. It came out in a weak chirp.

"Jess—left me a note," she said. "I followed, and watched. But only you came back."

"Yeah," I managed. "Jess bought it."

"I guess I knew, but they said you couldn't have come that far alone, with all those spinners in you."

I had a sudden thought and moved a hand down, not without a certain effort, and felt a leg where a leg ought to be.

"You're all right now," she said. "I got you to a slicer in time. He grafted a liver, and some nerve tissue, and the femoral artery was in bad shape. But he patched you."

She fed me some soup then. When the soup was gone, she made a lot out of fluffing pillows and getting the light just right. Then she lit up a dope stick and said, "Why did you do it?"

"There was some information I wanted. I had an idea I might find it there."

"And did you?"

"I'm not sure."

"Jess thought you knew something that was very important for—certain people."

"He was wrong about that."

"Who are you? Where did you come from?" She sounded as if she hated to ask the question and didn't want to know the answer.

"This is going to sound a little screwy," I said. "But I'm not sure about that either."

"You mean—amnesia?"

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"Maybe that's what you'd call it. I know my name, and I can tie my own shoes. Outside of that. . . ."

"You're a strange man. You have a strange way of talking—and not only the accent. You joke about death and suffering."

"I was hoping maybe you could tell me something useful on those subjects."

"What do you mean?"

"About why Jess thought I was important enough to bring home for a souvenir, and why the cops are after me."

"I know what he told me," she said. "That's all. About the rest—I don't know anything."

"You must have a few ideas."

"I've told you all I can." She looked past me. Her face was tight.

"Sure," I said. "In that case maybe I'd better catch another few winks. We wouldn't want all that fine craftsmanship to go to waste."

I did a lot of sleeping during the next few days. It might have been something the girl put in my soup—or maybe it was just Mother Nature, stitching me back together. There were a lot of things I didn't care for in the twenty-second century, but their medicine was as far ahead of the old familiar GP as a 707 was ahead of a dog cart. Minka stayed close, doing nurse's chores with a lot of efficiency and as little conversation as possible. Quite a few days slipped by, while I lay on my back and watched the clouds out beyond a balcony like Jess's and didn't think about a lot of things. Then one evening I had a sudden urge to get out of bed and sample some fresh air.

I got a leg over the side of the bed and that worked OK, so I stood up and started across toward the columns. I was halfway there when Minka came into the room.

"What are you doing?" She was right there, with an arm around me, propping me up. "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

"Would it matter?"

"I brought you here because I wanted to learn things from you. But I don't care about that now. There's been enough death."

"I've got to go, Minka. You know that."

"Stay here, Steve. You'll be safe here. Out there they'll kill you."

"Out there is where the answers are."

"Jess wanted answers—and they killed him. Why not forget all that—"

"There are places I've got to go, things that want me to do them."

"Why? Do you think you can change the world, like Jess did? You can't, Steve. No one man can. We've made this world what it is. It's the way we wanted it. Safe, comfortable, plenty of food, plenty of leisure, a long life—for those who don't rock the boat."

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"I'm no world-saver, Minka. But I don't like unfinished business."

"They've lost your trail; they'll never find you! I can get you a new tag, a cull-mark—everything—"

I shook my head.

"Why are you doing this? What could you possibly learn that would be worth risking your life for?"

"It's something I have to do for a friend. He's counting on me."

She laughed, not a pretty laugh. "And you wouldn't be the one to let a friend down, would you, Steve?"

I left the next afternoon, briefed to the ears, armed with a neat little watch-pocket blaster, and feeling better than anybody had a right to, two weeks after having new insides installed. I rode an elevator that dropped so fast my stomach was ready to climb out and have a look by the time the door opened and palmed me out onto a pavement halfway between a street and a corridor.

I moved off along the walk, mingled with men in capes and three-cornered hats, women in all-over ruffles and stand-up lace collars, and some stripped to the waist and painted like barber poles, and a few of both sexes wrapped in old bedsheets. They looked like survivors of a three-day fancy-dress ball. A five-minute walk brought me to what Minka had told me to look for: a wide frosted-glass front over blank doors with cryptic signs that said things like PVR SLD II (9) and OUT—Z99.

I went through one of the doors and was in a narrow chute like the bull comes out of. I followed it along to a concourse crowded with people looking like travelers have looked ever since home got to be a place to get away from. I saw a few lads in dark uniforms standing here and there eyeballing the scene, but the uniforms were grey and had MVNT CNTRL lettered on their pocket patches. But they packed guns, just like real Blackies.

There was a railing on the right, and below it a spread of pavement with a rank of big torpedoes the size of Titan Two's lit up like Christmas trees. Little cars like U-dodge-ems were ducking around between them, ferrying passengers. I went along the gallery, took the down escalator. Two of the men in grey were standing at the bottom looking at faces; two pairs of eyes lit on me like hawks on a mouse. I felt them all the way down and across the tarmac, but it must have just been my conscience bothering me. They let me go.

The car I took a seat in didn't look much different from any other city bus, but it slid into a dark tunnel and put its nose down and

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dropped like a roller-coaster. Six minutes later I stepped out into a glassed-in room full of people and flashing lights and noise. I crossed it, went down a sloping ramp and was outside again. There weren't many people here. In the distance the city lights were a wall in the sky.

This was the spot where I was supposed to pick up a tunnel car that dipped twenty miles underground and made the distance to Chicago quicker than an ICBM. The signs weren't much help. Over on the left, beyond half a dozen sets of what could have been roller-coaster rails something whooshed and a low-slung vehicle riding on two fore- and aft-mounted wheels came slamming down the track and stopped. The lid popped up and a fat man and a thin woman got in. It racketed off and another one came down the line and curbed itself.

There was a low rail between me and the cars. I jumped it, went along a narrow strip that looked as if it might not electrocute me. I went around the rear of the car and put a hand on the door and it opened. Behind me a cool voice said, "Stop there."

I turned around, not too fast. Two grey uniforms were coming over, relaxed, taking their time. One of them said, "Movement Control," and the other one said, "Step over here." No "pleases" and "thank you's" for these boys.

I came back around the car and across in the indicated direction. The one on the left went past me toward the car, which put me between them and a yard from his partner. I doubled my fist and hit him low in the stomach and grabbed the front of the grey blouse and swung him around. The other one had heard something; he went for his hip. I threw his friend at him and socked him in the throat and vaulted into the car. I slapped the big red button and the wheels screamed and I was off.

7

For the first hour I drove with my shoulders tight, listening for the sirens or whatever they might have thought up to replace them in this new, improved-model world. Then I had a thought that cheered me some. This was an Autopike; the coppers probably had ways of pinpointing any vehicle operating on it anywhere—as long as he was locked into the system. But I was on manual. As long as I stayed with the pack, there was no way to pick me out —maybe.

I held the car at 200 mph for five hours. About a hundred miles northwest of where the little map unrolling on the dash screen said the sprawl of light called Chago was, I pulled off on a lay-by marked with big arrows of luminous rose paint. I reached inside

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my left jacket cuff and ripped loose the plastic button Minka had put there to fool the scanners and tossed it on the floor. Then I flipped the controls to Auto and hopped out. The car jumped off from the rail and curvetted on her two wheels along the metal strip in the road, angled out and joined the main lane, picking up speed fast, running empty. She went over the rise howling, with her controls pegged at top emergency speed. I went over the guard rail and felt for a toe hold and started down.

By the time the sun was an hour in the sky, I was five miles north of the pike, working my way through a swampy patch toward the higher ground north and west of me. The years had made a lot of difference in what had been farming country and tame woods back in my hunting days. Now it had the look of the forest primeval. The oaks and elms and maples were five feet across at the base, and there was a new tree I'd never seen before, a tapered, smooth-barked conifer that probably all started from a salted nut dropped by a tourist along the roadside. It was late in the year, later than the temperature would make you think. Leaves were already turning red, and the smell of fall was in the air.

I had a long walk ahead, but this part of the route was easy. I steered by the sun, stayed away from the right of way of the few roads I came to that had cars on them. It seemed that the national passion for touring the country in the family station wagon had finally worked itself out. People either stayed in their hives, close to the buttons they needed to push for life's necessities, or did their traveling by air or crosscountry tube. I saw a few high contrails, and once a copter whiffled past a mile away at treetop level, but whatever the boys used to sniff out fugitives wasn't geared to a guy without the little telltale set in the bone back of the ear. I was an untagged man, and as invisible to them as an Indian was to Braddock.

By midafternoon I had crossed three ridges and was coming down into a valley that had that half-familiar look of an old drinking buddy who's gotten married and acquired six kids and a psychiatrist since the last time you met. The trees were a hundred years bigger than they should have been, but otherwise it all looked just the way it had the last time. . . .

I couldn't exactly place the last time.

I went on down to a gravel strip that had been a road, thought it over and tried the left-hand direction and ten minutes later recognized the turnoff that led up to Musky Lake. The cut was choked solid with brush and a nice

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stand of hardwoods. I started into it and spent a rough hour working my way up to the edge of a long meadow that stretched up to where the hills began to get rugged. The trace of the road was clear here. I kept to the edge of the woods, paralleled it until it swung right and went between broken rock faces.

It took me an hour to reach the top of the ridge. I picked a route back toward where the road sliced through and saw a light through the trees. It seemed that Musky Lake wasn't the unspoiled wilderness it was in the old days, after all.

I counted the lights shining through the dusk. There were eight of them, spaced at regular intervals on the other side of the rise of ground ahead. I was still admiring this view when something big and dark with lots of blue and red nav lights whiffled overhead and disappeared over the ridge. The place I was heading for seemed to be a popular spot with the airborne set—and the look of the jobs I'd seen spelled military. I got a good grip on my will power and started up the slope, belly to the ground.

This was territory I'd walked over plenty of times. I knew every bush and rock of it—or had once. The bushes had grown into trees and most of the rocks seemed to be missing, but the contour of the land hadn't changed. I reached the top of the rise and looked down into what had once been the prettiest valley this side of Kashmir. In the late twilight, I could see trees that thinned out for fifty feet down the rocky slope to a stretch of open ground a hundred feet wide and a cluster of buildings beyond, all of it lit like a prison yard on hanging night.

It took me half an hour to find a route across the no man's land in the dark. An old drainage ditch, choked level with weeds, was it. It wasn't over two feet deep where it went between the lights. I hugged the dirt and did it with my fingers and toes, an inch at a time. Fifteen minutes of this put me far enough inside the lights to risk sticking my head up.

It was full dark now, with no moon. A couple of copters had flitted overhead, and a big VTOL job had made a noisy descent a couple of miles away, on the far side of the valley. But over here on my side, all was peaceful.

I spent the next two hours scouting through the underbrush that grew thick beyond the ring of lights. Besides the group of buildings here on the west side of the valley there was another building on the east, taller, with lots of windows with lights behind them and fenced grounds all around. The rest of the enclosure seemed to be virgin forest. Somebody had gone to a lot of trouble to wall in

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a patch of woods no different from twenty miles of the same thing I'd traveled through getting here.

The going was easier in among the big timber. There was a slight downward drift to the ground and not much in the way of underbrush. Then I saw a gleam ahead that looked like riffled water with moonlight on it. I came down the last slope and clear of the trees and looked at Musky Lake.

For a long, timeless minute I looked out across the water and listened to the old voices, whispering to me over all the years, as if no time had passed at all. From here, you couldn't see the barracks or the fenced-in palace and its wall, just the lake, stretching to the far shore with the rising wall of big pines behind it, and over to the left the point where the cabin had stood, the one Frazier and I built barehanded one summer just after the war. I looked toward it and at first the shadows there under the big trees fooled me, and then I blinked hard and was still seeing the same thing. The cabin was still standing, right where we'd left it.

I took the path along the soft ground at the edge of the water and had the feeling that if I blinked again, it would go away. I came up on it from the left, the way we used to come down from shooting up in the woods, and even the melon patch was still there, a little overgrown; but clear enough in the moonlight. The dock was off to the right, and the old flat-bottomed skiff was tied up at the end of it, with the bow offshore, the way I'd always anchored her. I had the impulse to yell and see if Frazier would come out the door, waving a jug and telling me to hurry up, the serious drinking was about to begin. . . .

I came up with the little gun in my hand, skirted the place at a hundred yards, then worked my way around to the front and looked out across the lake. And just like that, I had it.

It was one of those days that stick in your mind down through the years: a hot day, with a breeze on the lake that riffled the surface just enough to bring the bass out of the deep hollows and up from under the sunken logs to snap at the big juicy flies the wind was bringing out over the water. Frazier and I had landed half a boat full before the wind died and they stopped hitting. The two girls—Gwen and Rosanne—had laid out a nice table while we cleaned the haul and packed what we couldn't eat in the freezer. After dinner we went down to the shore and sat under the trees and finished off the bottle—the third bottle of the day. We had a big laugh with it: the third fifth on the Fourth of July.

There'd been a big pine stump outside the cabin. We counted the rings: two hundred and forty-seven. Then we buried the dead sol-

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dier under it with full military honors....

It took me under ten minutes to find the stump, grub away enough packed leaves and hard dirt to find the gap down among the roots and pull out the bottle. The label was gone and the metal screw cap had been replaced with a hard, waxy plug, but it looked like the same bottle. I held it up to the light and made out something inside it, pale through the brown glass.

My mouth felt a little dry and my pulse was rocking my hand a little, but otherwise there was just the feeling of unnatural awareness you get when all the days of anticipation focus down to the second you've been working toward. I made a couple of tries to get the sealing wax loose, then cracked the neck of the bottle off and reached in and teased the paper out.

It was just one sheet, folded and rolled, and all it had on it was two words: COUGAR CAVE

It was a stiff half-hour's climb up through dense timber to the escarpment on the east side of the valley where the bare rock pushed up a hundred and fifty feet higher than it did anywhere else along the rim. There were boulders there as big as London busses, piled where the glacier had left them, and in among them there were a lot of cosy little caves where Frazier and I had flushed everything from weasels to a mothy brown bear. The one where I'd met the cougar was up high, with an approach across a rockface that made it too hard to reach to interest most critters, or most hunters. The time I'd gone up there I was chasing a wolverine with a 30-30 slug in him who didn't know when to lie down and be dead. It wasn't the kind of chore that was any fun; I did it because if I hadn't, a long line of hunting Draveks would have come out of their graves spinning like roulette wheels. I went up soft and easy and my carcajou was there, a yard inside the overhang, dead. I had one foot up to make the big mistake when I smelled cat and saw him, curled up in the back, logy after a kill maybe, just starting to move. I faded back and slid all the way to the bottom and spent the next week growing new skin on my palms and the seat of my pants. I'd never been back.

I made it to the ledge in ten minutes and came up over it and went flat, and looked back into shadows. It was no different from the last time, except no kitty.

Inside, there was the same smell of wet rock and animal droppings that all these caves had. I had to duck to get in past the outer vestibule, where the wolverine had died, and was in a bigger chamber, about right for garaging a VW, if you could get it inside. The floor here was the dirt that had drifted in during the last few thousand years, more or less smooth-packed; the walls slanted up to a

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craggy ceiling with air spaces with roots showing in them. That gave me enough light to show me that things were just like I left them, without a hiding place for anything bigger than an aspirin. If I were hoping to find a ten volume journal telling me what it was all about, I was out of luck. It had been a swell chase up to now, but it looked like I was going to go back to the frat house minus the motorman's glove after all.

I went back into the outer cave and scraped my foot across the spot where the devil cat had used up the last of his chips and saw the shine of metal. . . .

It was a stainless steel lock-box, not locked. All it had in it was a heavy plastic envelope, sealed. I got that open and took out a sheet of paper with typing on it and read:

"In the back room. Look up high, on the left. The opening looks too small, but you can make it. About fifty feet. Brace yourself."

The hole was there all right, and it looked too small, just like the man said. But I got up there and got my shoulders in and twisted over on my side and started in.

The tunnel slanted down after the first couple of yards, tight going but just on the right side of possible. In a couple of places I felt smooth clay where somebody had done some excavating. It was pitch dark once I was below the broken rock level and into the solid stuff. This part of the tunnel was wider. I did it on my hands and knees, using my head for a bumper. Even in the dark I could tell this was a man-made shaft now. It dropped at a thirty-degree angle, and after about twenty feet it turned hard to the left, then left again and down another twenty feet and there was light ahead.

I stopped there and felt my gun for whatever good that did me and listened hard, trying to make up my mind whether I heard a faint sound coming from down below or not, decided it was just a ringing in my ears, and did the last few feet to another right-angled turn which opened into a room.

It wasn't a cave. The walls were cut smooth and faced with concrete. The floor was natural stone, ground smooth. The ceiling was high enough that I didn't have to duck. The light was coming from a strip down the center of it that shed a pale green light on something bulky that almost filled the little room. It was a cylinder, ten feet long, five feet in diameter, looped and hung with plastic piping and wires. I'd seen something like it once before, in the sealed wing under my old plant. That one had had a corpse in it. This one felt different.

I came up to it easy, as if there might be something there that I didn't want to startle. I put a hand

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against the side of the big tank and felt a vibration so faint that if I hadn't been alone under forty feet of solid rock, I wouldn't have thought it was there at all. The curve of the top of the thing was a little above my eye level, but there was a platform there for me to step up on. I did, and looked down at a clear plastic plate about a foot square, set in the top curve of the tank. It was misty, and I had to lean close to see through it. When I did, a big hand as cold as death closed on my chest and squeezed.

The face behind the cloudy glass was that of a child, a little girl no more than six years old, pale and translucent as a china doll.

It was the face from the dreams.

8

I found the letter lying on the platform and got it open. By holding it three inches from my face, I could read it:

"Cute, eh? Frazier built it when he was building the Keep, right under his nose. He knew him: too tough to know when he met a man who was tougher.

"There's just one place more to go now. I think I've got a chance, maybe even a good chance, but I'm leaving what I've got for you, in case I slip. Maybe I was a little too tricky, feeding it to you in pieces, but it makes a broken trail that can't be cracked by an outside man with one lucky find. Except the one man, and I'm counting on the trick paint to take him out. What I planted in the box for him to find should make him happy enough to call off his dogs, at least long enough to give you your chance, if it comes to that.

"What's on the next sheets cost a lot of lives and years to get; it's the genuine article.

"Now I'm going to take one more look, and remember some things, so when the choice gets tough I'll know which one to make. Then I'm going in, and I won't be back this way."

The drawing on the sheet tacked to the back of the note showed me the valley and the lake and a spot on the north side that matched the town, labeled "Keep." There was an X marking the cougar cave. Another sketch below showed the details of a door and a shaft cut to below the valley floor, and a tunnel down there that crossed to the Keep, and then some more detail on a hatch that led out into a false wall behind a furnace room. Another page had the layout of the Keep, including more dummy passages and double walls than Canterville Castle. They led all the way to a big spread on the top level, with a couple of alternates and a few question marks, just to give me the feeling it hadn't all been done for me.

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He was quite a guy, my letter writer, and he expected a lot of me. More than he was likely to get.

I was supposed to know a lot of things I didn't, and maybe those were the things that would have made me hot to tighten my belt and go looking for the kind of trouble that would be waiting for me at the end of that cute tunnel and those neat rat holes in the walls.

I thought these thoughts for half an hour or so. Then I went over to the door that was cut into the wall behind the big tank and got it open. There were steps and I started down.

There was enough water in the tunnel to make a spotty reflection of the glow from the ceiling strip and show up the rats that moved away ahead of me just out of BB gun range. I stopped a couple of times to listen, in case somebody was waiting for me up ahead and making noises. I didn't hear anything. That made me feel lonelier than ever. The tunnel ended at a stair like the one I'd come down.

It went up forty feet and ended in a landing just big enough to stand on. There was a wooden panel in front of me with something chalked on the back of it in block letters: HINGES AT LEFT. WATCH FOR TRAFFIC FROM KITCHEN.

I felt over the panel, put a little weight against the right edge. It swung out and dust sifted down. I could see light coming through a vertical space at the end of a narrow passage between the wall and a slab of sheet metal that would be the back of the heat plant. Past that, I could see a big room with long tables and cabinets built in along one wall and, through a half open door, into another big room with a light and men in black sitting around a table. A clock on the wall over their heads said three twenty-eight. The night was wearing on.

I faded back and worked my way along the side of the walk-in reefer and located the three bolt heads the map had shown which looked like the other ones but which turned with a little persuasion. A piece of solid-looking wall rode straight back on oiled rails. I pushed in past it into a tight space and closed it behind me. What I was in now was a tight vertical shaft thirty inches in diameter with six-inch rods going up in a spiral and a smell of old dust. The wall of the shaft and the rods both had the soapy feel of a high-polymer plastic. I checked to be sure my gat was riding around front where I could get at it, and started up.

It was a nice easy climb for the first few dozen turns. Then my back started to ache from the bent-over position, and my arches started to feel the rods. My hands were slippery with sweat, and it was a long way down. All the light I had

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to see by was a creepy pale green glow that came from the plastic itself. I reminded myself of one of those restless corpses that grandpa used to tell me about before the DT's got him. The kind they had back in the old country that used to come out from under tombstones on the night of the new moon. Only this time I was the spook. I decided to give up that line of thought before I scared myself to death and just then somebody tapped me on the shoulder.

Now, maybe you think a tough Hunky with a gun in his pants can absorb that kind of surprise with no more reaction than a curled lip and a reflex move toward the hip. I made the reflex move OK: I jumped so hard I bent one of the rods an inch out of line with my head. One foot slipped off, and I was hanging by my hands looking up at bones.

There was enough light to see a set of fingers and a wrist joint and above that what was left of an arm leading up to some less clearly defined parts of the anatomy. There was no flesh, just the clean yellow-white skeleton, glowing a little itself, like old neon in the dark. I made out the skull with the lower jaw hanging wide open, as if it were getting ready to take a bite, and the other arm and the torso and legs, just sort of folded down against the spine, which was broken in two places and doubled back on itself and jammed against the rungs.

I held on there for a while and then got my feet back on the rungs and made three tries and swallowed and felt sweat drip off the end of my nose. I let a couple of minutes tiptoe by and then unglued one hand and reached up and got a grip on Mr. Bones above the wrist and pulled. The forearm came off at the elbow and flopped back and broke at the wrist. Small bones made a light clatter going down the shaft. I dropped the ulna and went up a step higher, raising my face in front of the spot where the hand had been. There was something on the wall there, a stain in the form of a couple of lines that made a straggly T. I touched the lines and a dry brownish powder crumbled away. Dried blood. Before he'd died, the skeleton with the broken back had tried to write something, and almost made it.

T. T for Treachery, or for Too late. I couldn't think of anything good that started with a T. T for Trouble, T for Turn back.

T for Trap.

I looked up past the bones and saw the faint cylindrical shine of the tube, leading on up to where I wanted to go. To the place I had to go, to find the man I had to find.

I pushed at the bones, and they fell away into darkness with a dry clatter. The rungs led upward an-

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other hundred feet and ended at a trap door. I tried it and it gave out into cool fresh air. I was on the roof.

I looked across seventy feet of open space and saw a second tower going up thirty feet higher than the one I was in, with lights and a wide terrace tacked to one corner like icing on a wedding cake. Soft music was coming from there; it looked lived-in. The problem was getting across that last few feet. I went over to the parapet and had a look.

What I saw wasn't encouraging: a sheer drop of fifty feet to a ledge where light shone out on plants growing in a box and below that another drop of a couple hundred feet to the walled court, looking the size of a four cent regular issue. Off to the left, a connecting wall went across to the other tower, at the level of the planter ledge. To the right there was a swell view of the string of lights in the distance along the perimeter of the reservation. None of that gave me any ideas. I backed off, feeling that vulnerable feeling that high places give me, and heard a sound that made me spin and grab for the gun. Then lights went on all across the roof, big dazzlers, mounted on six-foot poles. The air around them looked like blue smoke, and they highlighted the shape of every pebble on the roof like a die-cutter stamping silhouettes out of sheet steel. There was one patch of shadow, as black as a chimney sweep's T-shirt, cast by the door head, and I was in it.

Men were coming out on the roof and fanning out. There was no talking. The guns in their hands told me all I needed to know. I backed away, which put the parapet against the back of my thighs. I didn't think about it; I swung one leg over and found a toe hold on the other side and ducked and heard feet walk past and stop and come back. That was enough for me. I got a grip on the ledge I was squatting on and let my legs down and felt around for a place to put them and started down.

Ten minutes later I reached the ledge I'd seen from above. It went straight on for forty feet to the fancy corner. The wall crossing to the other tower joined there. I put my cheek to the wall and went along to the end. Then I turned to put my back to the wall and jumped for the crosswalk. I landed on all fours and headed for the deep shadow at the far end. As I reached it, the light traveled back along the ledge and up the wall again and went out. I sat up and felt around in the dark and found a heavy stone balustrade. I got over that and was on a narrow terrace with a row of pots big enough for Ali Baba. Vines were rooted in them, growing thick and black up the wall. Up above I could see a little

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light on the railing of the higher terrace. The vines grew there, too. It looked like it might be possible for a trained athlete in top condition, with spiked climbing shoes and a Derby winner's luck. I stepped up on the stone railing and got a fistful of tough vine and started up.

It might have been half an hour later when I got a hand on the bright-plated railing of the upper balcony just as the pencil-thick creeper I was hanging onto let go. There were a few seconds of fast living then, while I grabbed for a two-handed grip and waited for my life to flash before my eyes. Then I was hanging on by a knee and an elbow, looking across polished tiles into a deep room full of subdued light and oiled teak paneling and a desk no bigger than a Cadillac with a man sitting at it, facing away from me. He was leaning back in the chair, smoking a cigaret. He had wide shoulders and a solid neck and a little grey in his hair. As far as I could tell, he was alone. While I looked at him, he reached and stubbed the butt out in an ashtray hewn out of a chunk of glass the size of a football. Then he pushed a button and a drawer slid open and up. He lifted a big decanter and poured dark brandy into a glass. While both his hands were busy stoppering the decanter, I came up and over the rail and slid the gun into my hand and went over to the open doors and said, "Don't even breathe, pal."

He checked, just for an instant; then he hit the stopper with his palm and put the jug back in the drawer and swung around to face me.

The man I was looking at was me.

9

For about ten seconds we stared at each other. Then I saw that he wasn't so much looking at me as he was giving me a chance to look at him. He was something to look at.

I've never had a delicate look, but this face was hewn out of the earth's primordial rock, weathered to a saddle brown and lined a little by Time's erosion, then polished with a hand finer than Cellini's to a portrait of power held in restraint. He could have been anywhere from a tough forty-five to a smooth sixty. He was wearing a wine colored dressing gown with a black collar; his neck projected from it like the trunk of an oak tree. His expression was somewhere between a smile too faint to see and no expression at all.

"All right, you got here," he said in my voice. "Come in and sit down. We have things to talk about."

I moved a step and then remembered I was giving the orders. "Stand up and move away from the desk," I said. "Do it nice and

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easy. I'm not good enough with this thing to try any near misses."

He pushed the corners of his mouth up half a millimeter and didn't move. "I tried to find you before you took the risk of coming here—"

"Your boys are second-rate. Soft from too much easy duty, maybe." I motioned with the gun. "I won't tell you three times."

He shook his head, or maybe my eyelid quivered. He wasn't a guy to waste effort on a lot of unnecessary facial expressions.

"You didn't come here to shoot me," he said.

"I could change my plans. Being here makes me nervous. Not having you co-operate makes me even more nervous. When I'm nervous I do some dumb things. I'm going to do one now." I raised the gun and aimed it between his eyes and was squeezing, and he came out of the chair fast. He gave me a big smile. You could almost see it.

"If I'd meant to hurt you, I could have done it any time since you crossed the line," he said. "It's wired—"

"The perimeter fence, maybe. Not inside. Your own troops would be tripping it a hundred times a day."

"You think you could have gotten this far without my knowing?"

"You can't lock the world out unless you lock yourself in. Eighty years of waiting could make a man careless."

He gave me a little frown to look at. "Who do you think I am?"

"There are some holes in the picture," I said, "but the part that's there says you're a guy I used to know. His name was Steve Dravek."

"But you're Steve Dravek," he said it the way you tell a kid his dog died.

"I just think I'm Steve Dravek," I told him. "You're the real article."

He frowned a little more. "You mean—you think I'm the original Dravek, born in 1947?"

"It sounds a little funny," I said, "but that's what I think."

He tilted his head a quarter of an inch and did something subtle that changed the frown back into a smile.

"No wonder you're nervous," he said. "My God, boy, put the gun away and sit down and have a drink. I'm not Number One; I'm Number Five!"

I moved around him to a chair and waved him to one and watched him sit, and then I sat and rested the gun on my knee so the shaky hand wouldn't be so obvious. I wanted a drink the way Romeo wanted Juliet.

"What happened to Four?"

"What you'd expect. He was past his prime—over fifty. I tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't talk. Why should he? He owned the world."

"That would be how long ago?"

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"Over forty years. As soon as I'd established myself here—there was a certain amount of pretty delicate maneuvering involved there—I tried to find out if there were any more of us. I drew a blank." He almost blinked. "Until you turned up."

"Tell me about that part."

"The tanks were rigged to signal when they were opened from the inside, just one quick squawk on the microwave band. You'd have to know just where to listen to pick it up. Unfortunately, there was no R and D feature, just the signal saying you were on the way. I tried to find you, but you dropped out of sight."

"It seemed like a good idea, even if your Blackies are lousy shots."

"They were instructed to fire anesthetic pellets."

"Some of those pellets packed quite a wallop."

He nodded. "It was too bad about that little man, Jess Ralph. When the men surprised you there, they jumped to a couple of conclusions—"

"Somebody tipped them. They were waiting."

"Naturally the ETORP reserve is under close guard—"

"Pass that. If you wanted to talk to me, why didn't you leave a message where I'd find it? You would have known where. And it would have been simpler than telling your Blackies to wing me."

"Would you have trusted me? As I remember the final instructions Frazier added to my ceph-tape, they painted a pretty black picture of the Old Man. I thought it was better to handle it as I did, let you follow the same trail I did. And it had the added advantage of bringing you here in secret. I think you can see it might complicate things to have the word get out that there were two of us."

"Uh-huh," I said, "maybe. By the way, let's see your wrist."

He looked thoughtful. Then he turned back his right cuff and showed it to me.

"It was the other one, remember?"

He showed me that one. The skin was perfect; there was no sign of a scar.

"Satisfied now?" He was looking a little more relaxed. Maybe I was, too.

"Suppose you're telling the truth," I said. "How does that change things?"

"It ought to be pretty plain. The Old Man was nuts, power-crazy. I don't share that part of his personality."

"You took over where he left off," I said. "Nothing's changed."

"The world he built wasn't something I could rebuild in a day. It all takes time; if I tried to reform the whole thing at once, I'd have chaos on my hands."

"I got the feeling things were getting worse instead of better."

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"It's not surprising you had a few wrong slants, considering the company you were keeping."

"What company would that be?"

"The little man, Jess. I thought you knew. He was Frazier's grandson."

"There seems to be a lot of things I don't know," I said. "Maybe by the time it got to be my turn the brainwashing machine was slipping its clutch. Maybe you'd better give me the whole story, right from the top."

His face tightened and his eyes looked at me and beyond me into the past.

"The first part of it, I remember myself, as if it were really me it happened to. The tapes Frazier took were good ones. Every detail is there, as clear as yesterday. . . .

"It started like any other morning. I had breakfast out on the terrace with Marion, drove to the plant, spent some time going over some tax figures with Frazier. Then we went down to the new basement wing to see how the new pilot rig was going. It was a new process that was going to make us a mint. A new principle that would put us years ahead of anything else on the market.

"It was about half past ten when it happened. Marion was on the way into the city to do some shopping. The kid was with her. They stopped because she had some flowers she'd picked for me. White daisies, the first of the year. There were a lot of them down by the pool. . . .

"They went to the office first, where some damned fool told them I was down in the new wing. They came on down.

"Frazier and I were over by the big cryo tank, watching Brownie stitch a plate in. Something slipped, and a piece of quarter-inch got away from the lift and dropped and cut the high tension lead from the portable welding rig. There was a lot of arcing and smoke—and right in the middle of it they came in.

"I started over there and waved them away and yelled to them to go back, and she saw me wave and started across. Before Marion could grab her, she got into the smoke and lost her bearings. I yelled to her again to go back. She heard me and turned my way and put a foot on the edge of the plate that was carrying sixty-thousand amps.

"I was the first one to her. I grabbed her and yelled for the plant doc. The son of a bitch was off playing golf, and there wasn't anybody else near enough to do any good. She wasn't breathing; there was no pulse. I knew five minutes of that and her brain would be gone forever. . . .

"I did the only thing I could do. We had a liquid nitrogen setup running in glass. I took her in there and told Frazier to get the top off the big receiver tank. He argued and I knocked him down.

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They all thought I'd gone nuts. I got it open myself and came back. Marion was holding her and wouldn't let her go. I had to take her. I carried her in and injected her and got her wrapped and put her inside and closed up and charged the coils and watched the plate frost over. In less than a minute it was done. Then I came back out, and they were waiting for me, with guns and a cop they'd gotten in from somewhere. I could have torn 'em apart with my bare hands, but I knew I couldn't afford any mistakes now. She was in there, frozen, at six degrees Kelvin, but it was no good unless I convinced them I knew what I was doing, that it was the only chance.

"I talked to them. I kept calm and talked to them. I told them the kid was dead and that what I'd done hadn't killed her any deader and that as long as they left her where I'd put her, she'd stay just the way she was then. If any damage had been done, it was already done, and if it hadn't—well, if it hadn't, it was up to the medics to find out how to bring her back. And that meanwhile she would stay where she was.

"Frazier was the first to see it and side with me. He'd been crazy about the kid. He got them under control and cleared the cops out and got a bunch of big-domes from Mayo over there. I went back home and drank a year's supply of booze in the next week. I didn't know where Marion was. They said I'd hit her pretty hard. But I wasn't thinking about Marion. I was only thinking about the kid.

"Some sob sisters got hold of it then, and the newspapers got into it, and I was indicted for everything from murder to graverobbery. There were laws that said a body had to be buried within two days, and a lot of other junk.

"Well, I beat 'em. She was underground. The research wing was twelve feet down. And I had witnesses that there were no pulse and no breathing. The papers kept playing the story for a few months, but after a while that stopped, too.

"I had the room where it happened walled off. I never wanted to see it again.

"We went ahead with the new process, and it worked out just as I said it would. Food quick-frozen to under ten degrees K would keep forever and come out as if it had been fresh that morning. Even the leafy stuff, lettuce and potatoes, everything. In a year we had a hundred licensees. In two years we'd stopped licensing and had our own plants in forty-two countries. I poured every dime back into research, and the more we learned the quicker we learned. I didn't give a damn about the business. All I wanted was the money and the know-how to push the medical program. I went on working and waiting for the day the docs would give me the go-ahead.

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"But they were a cagey bunch. In a year they told me they thought they were on the right track. In two, they were talking about breakthroughs. In five, it was unanticipated complexities in the mechanics of submolecular crystalization. By the time they'd been at it for ten years, to the tune of a hundred million a year, they were doing a lot of cute tricks with frozen mice and cats and lambs and telling me about critical thresholds and optimum permeability-mass ratios and energy transference rates and all the other gobbledygook their kind use to keep the layman shelling out.

"I called for a showdown, and they said, 'Of course, Mr. Dravek, certainly, Mr. Dravek, whatever you say, Mr. Dravek. But we won't be responsible. . . .'

"What could I do? I hired and fired medical directors like baseball managers, but they all gave me the same pitch: wait another year just to be on the safe side. . . . Five more years went by, and another five, and meanwhile Draco Incorporated had grown into the biggest international combine on earth. We were in foods and medicines and the equipment that went with them and had sidelines that were bigger than most of the world's industrial giants. The government had tried to step in ten different times to break us, but by then I'd made some interesting discoveries about politicians. They bribe easily, and a lot cheaper than you'd think. And for the big boys —the ones who would have laughed at money—we had some other little items. Those sawbones hadn't been just rolling pills. They'd come up with tricks that could make a man look and feel twenty years younger, and the Draco Foundation had been doing a lot with grafts and regeneration. We didn't publicize all this. It was strictly hush-hush, behind-the-walls stuff. Only our friends got in on it, and by then we didn't have a lot of enemies. So they left us alone, and I waited, and now they were talking about next year, maybe, and then a few more months and we'll be ready to take the chance. . . .

"You see, by then they had the techniques for deep-freezing and thawing. Hell, we were doing it on a commercial scale. But we were doing it under controlled cryolab conditions, with everything from tissue salinity to residual muscular electric charge controlled every step of the way.

"But with the kid, I hadn't had time for anything fancy. I'd just injected her with an anti-crystallizer we used in vegetable processing and put her under. That made it different. It gave them an excuse to stall. Because that's what they were doing. Stalling. They figured as soon as I had her back, I'd pull the rug out from under their operation. The damned fools! As if I'd

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sabotage the program that had made me the richest tycoon that ever lived—and with the power to appoint the whole damned Supreme Court if I'd wanted to.

"So they stalled me. And I was getting older. By then it was 2003; I was almost sixty, not that I looked it. As I said, the pill rollers had come up with some tricks. But I knew I couldn't last forever, and I had a board of directors that were looking ahead, jockeying for the day when one of them would take over where I left off. I knew if I dropped dead, the day would never come for the kid. They'd leave her there. Because she was my heir, you see? If she was alive, she'd own it all, and they'd be cut out of the pattern. So I had to do something. I had to work out a plan that would carry on after my death, so some day she'd come back, and find her inheritance waiting for her.

"I thought about it, and worked out one plan and then another, and none of 'em were any good, none of 'em were foolproof. Because there was no way to be sure there'd be a man there I could trust. Frazier would have done it, but he was my age; he wouldn't outlast me long. And anyway, the only man I could really trust was —me. And that gave me the idea.

"I called in my Chief of Research and told him what I wanted. He told me I was out of my mind. I said, sure, Doc, but can you do it?

"He was a long time coming around, but in the end he had to admit there was no reason why it was impossible. Illegal, maybe—we'd had some trouble with a bunch of fanatics and we'd had to let a few token laws get on the books—but it wasn't any trickier than what we'd been doing for some of our chums in Congress.

"It was simple enough. We'd been using test-tube techniques for growing livestock for a long time. Our brood plant in Arizona covered ten acres and produced more beef in a year than the State of Texas used to in ten. They took germ cells from me and started them growing, then planted them in automated life-support tanks, like the stock-brooders, only fancier. I gave Frazier the job of picking the spots for the vaults to be built out of indetectible non-metallic material. I gave him orders not even to tell me. That way nobody could squeeze the secret out of me or step in and act in my name and break up the playhouse, because I didn't know myself where they were.

"The first duplicate was rigged to mature in twenty years. I figured to be around that long. I'd brief him myself, and he'd take over from me. They could scratch their heads and say that the Old Man was holding up a lot better than anybody figured, and when he'd run his time, the next one would be ready and so on down

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the line until the medics were ready to unfreeze the child. They could stall a long time, but they couldn't stall forever. And when they quit stalling, I'd be ready.

"That's where my tape ended. I came to in an abandoned mine shaft in Utah. The tank was set back into a side passage and covered over. There was information waiting for me, food, a full briefing up to the time Frazier had last been there, about 2020. The rest of the story I put together from the Old Man's records.

"It was a swell plan he'd worked out, practically perfect. Just one thing went wrong. He got a hurry-up call from the Old Lab one day. He went over and they told him all bets were off. There'd been a freak power failure, and the special tank she was in had lost its chill. The body had been at about a degree centigrade for a couple of hours when they discovered it. So now Duna was just a corpse like any other corpse. She looked the same, but that little spark they'd been keeping alive all those years —or trying to—was gone.

"It hit him hard, but not as hard as it had the first time. Over thirty years had gone by. He'd learned to live with it. She'd been the biggest thing in his life, once; he could still lie awake at night and remember her voice, the look on her face when she'd come running to meet him when he came home. But that was all it was: just a recollection out of a fairy tale he'd had once, a long time ago, and lost forever.

"He gave orders to Frazier for the body to be embalmed and buried, but by then Frazier was a little nuts on the subject. He didn't believe the medics. He wanted them to go ahead with the thaw, and when the Old Man wouldn't, he said some things to him that he'd have killed any other man for. Then he left.

"The Old Man went on with the funeral. And just before the grave was closed, he had a thought and told them to open the box. They did and it was empty. Or almost empty. There was a little scale model of some kind of Indian temple in it, made out of solid gold. Frazier's idea of a joke, maybe. He'd been a good man once, but he was getting old. The Old Man tried to find him but couldn't. He'd made some plans of his own. He was quite a boy, was Frazier. A billionaire in his own right. He knew how to cover a trail.

"So the Old Man called off the hunt. Frazier had been a good friend for a lot of years. It was too bad he'd gone off his rocker in his old age, but the thing to do was to let it go and forget it. As for the body—well, it was just a body now. In time Frazier would realize that and bury it, and it would all be over.

"Meanwhile, there was a business to run. In a way, it was a relief to the Old Man to have the

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girl off his mind. He'd been living in the past too long, trying to hold onto a dream that was a long time dying. Now he could put all his efforts into the important things.

"By this time the food-processing empire was the tail that was trying to wag the dog. The sidelines were the big business. Rejuvenation methods that could keep a man looking young at ninety, artificial organs that he manufactured under his own patents—and some he didn't even patent, because he didn't want any information leaks through the Patent Office. That was where the money was—and the power.

"After that things moved fast. The Old Man was already running the United States. He branched out then, took control of the French Assembly, then the Scandinavian Parliament, most of South America, Africa, Southeast Asia. He changed the name of the company, reorganized it, and took control out of the hands of the board and put it where it belonged: in his pocket."

"You said you changed the company's name," I butted in. I already knew the answer, but I wanted to hear it from him.

"The Draco Company was all right for a small food-processing firm," he said. "When the outfit grew and moved into the life-sciences field, the Old Man decided he needed something with a little more *elan*. He came up with Eternity, Incorporated."

"Commonly known as ETORP," I said.

He nodded. "He had it all in the palm of his hand, and then one day a man came gunning for him.

"The Plan, the one he'd worked out to insure that things were done his way, even after he died—was backfiring on him. Frazier's work. He'd been the one who set it up; he was the one the Old Man trusted. He'd matured the duplicate Dravek in an LS tank and briefed him to kill. It was a clever scheme. Who else was tough enough to kill Dravek—but Dravek?

"But it didn't work. Dravek Number Two found the Old Man; but the Old Man was too smart for him. He shot first. He had the body dumped where it would be found, so Frazier would hear about it and get the message.

"But Frazier was stubborn. Eighteen years later, another killer made his try. He went the same way. This time the Old Man knew Frazier had to go. He spent three years and a billion dollars, and he found him. But the medics weren't quick enough, and all he got out of him was the one fact: that each vault was set to signal when it opened. He got the details on that and nothing else.

"But when Number Three came out, he was ready for him. He was well over a hundred years old now, and still vigorous, but time was running out. He wanted an heir. So when Three showed, he knocked

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him out with a sleep gun. When he came out of it, he told him the story. And he took him in and treated him like a son.

"A few months later the Old Man died in his sleep and Number Three went on where he'd left off.

"But the machine was still grinding. Twenty years later, Number Four came along. There was an accident. He was killed. And then I showed up.

"I guess Number Three was a little greedy. He didn't try to talk to me, just took a shot at me. But my aim was better. I had to put his body down a shaft here in the walls. I meant to smuggle it out some day and give it a decent burial, but it was hard to do. The staff was a little suspicious of me. And after a while it didn't seem to matter.

"Things ran quietly for quite a long time. There were problems, but what Dravek Number One could do, Number Five could do again. I had an idea there'd be a Number Six along, about twenty years back, but he never showed up. I figured the Draveks were all used up. And then you showed up."

"And where do you figure we go from here?"

"I'm not quite as greedy as Three was, Steve. And like the Old Man, I'm getting along to an age where I'm thinking of an heir. I don't have a son."

"Make it plainer."

"There's plenty here for both of us. In a way, you have as much right to it as I do. I want you to stay and share it with me. The whole world, Steve—and everything that's in it. . . ."

He leaned toward me, and some of the deadness had gone out of his eyes, and the smile he was playing with was starting to be a real smile.

"I've got a lot to show you, Steve, a lot to tell you . . ." His hand went out to the little table beside him and dipped into the recess under it, and I brought the gun up from my side and shot him through the chest.

The shock half-spun him, knocked him out of the chair. I went after him fast, ready to fire again, but his face already had death written across it. His hand opened and the little silver-framed picture in it fell to the rug. The sleeve that had slid back when he reached was still pulled back almost to the elbow, and I could see the faint white line that ran all the way around his forearm six inches above the wrist.

"Who's arm did you steal, Old Man?" I got the words out. "Number Two's? Or weren't your boys good enough at their graft techniques back then?"

His head turned half an inch. His eyes found me.

"Why. . . ?"

I stooped and picked up the picture he had reached for. "I thought

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you were trying for your gun," I said. "But it would have ended that way anyway, as long as we had this between us."

A light crossed his face, like a cloud shadow crossing a field.

"Dead," he gasped out. "Dead . . . long . . . ago. . . ."

"She's alive, Old Man."

His eyes were holding mine, holding back death.

"Why did you do it, Old Man?" I gave him back his look. "Afraid a living heir might get in your way, after you'd learned how to make yourself immortal?"

He tried to speak, failed, tried again:

"Searched . . . all these years . . . never knew. . . ."

"Frazier outsmarted you after all. You ran the world, but in the end he took it away from you. I wonder what your boys did to him, to try to get him to talk. But he never did. He was loyal to you, Old Man, even after you'd stopped being loyal to yourself."

His face was a pale mask the color of old ivory under the tan. His mouth opened and moved. I stooped to hear him.

"Tell Duna I said . . . hello . . ." His eyes were still on mine, dead eyes now, claiming their last wish.

"Sure," I said. "I'll tell her."

EPILOGUE

They brought Duna up from the vault under the ridge where Frazier had hidden her, and for forty-eight hours the best brains in ETORP's cryothesia lab worked over her. Then they called me in, and I was there when she opened her eyes and smiled and said, "Daddy, I brought you some flowers."

That was twenty years ago. She's grown now, and a member of the second Mars Expedition. All the programs that had been stalled for a hundred and fifty years are moving ahead now, pushed by a force of nature that's like the grass root that cracks open a mountainside: population pressure.

I released the immortality drug for general distribution, free, the same day I opened the Ice Palace and started bringing the Old Ones out. Some talk has started up that I ought to reconvene Congress and hand the reins back over to the politicians, but I've got a theory that the world's not ready for that yet. I've set up a system that makes education tapes available to everybody, as many as they can absorb, on any subject. Someday I'll see signs that the race is growing up and that there are men around who are wise instead of just smart. When that day comes, I'll retire and take that trip to Alpha, if I'm still around. Maybe that's arrogance, or maybe it's a sense of responsibility. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference.

The Old Man kept a journal. It

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gave me the answers to a lot of questions that had been on my mind. The skeleton in the shaft was Number Five. He'd been shot but managed a getaway back into the shaft via a fake air intake in the top-floor equipment room. It didn't look big enough, but it was. He killed two Blackies on the way out, and no one saw where he went. So he kept his secret. The Old Man thought he'd gotten away clean.

The reason the Old Man hadn't closed off the route in via the tunnel was the easy one: he never found it. Frazier had concealed it so it would stay concealed.

The dead boy whom Jess and I had found was Number Two. The Old Man had killed him and left him like that, as a warning to the next one, if there was a next one. By that time, he was a worried man. And then he had another idea. He meant what he said about taking me in. He wanted somebody else to do the sitting up nights, while he had a brain transfer to a new body—a young, anonymous one—and settled back to enjoy owning the world.

I brought Minka to the Keep and married her. She and Duna got along swell. They should have. She was Marion's great-granddaughter, which made Duna some kind of great-aunt. She told me about Jess and his Secret Society. It didn't amount to much, after being handed down by word-of-mouth tradition for four generations. Most of it had been forgotten, and anyway, Frazier hadn't tried to saddle his descendants with a load of fossilized hates. But he'd left them the job of fighting ETORP, any way they could. Jess's way was hunting Blackies in the park. As I said, Jess was a guy who was full of surprises.

The Old Man had really believed Duna was dead. He knew Frazier didn't have the facilities or the technicians to revive her. The thing that stumped me for a long time was why Frazier had taken her, and I finally worked it out. It had been almost forty years by then, and Frazier had finally real-

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ized something: the Old Man was never going to bring her out.

Back in the early years, when he'd had about the same life expectancy as the rest of the race, he'd set up a corporation to take over his affairs after his death and operate it in Duna's name, holding it in trust for her until she was revived. He'd used all the pressure he had to set it up so it couldn't be broken and to hire the best brains he could buy to run it.

It was a good idea—until the day when his top medical boys told him they'd cracked the Big One and that now a chosen few could go on living as long as ETORP and its labs held out. That made a difference. Because by then there was a power struggle going on inside the organization that would have made the battle among Alexander's successors look like a pillow fight. That charter—and Duna, alive—was all the opposition needed to take over ETORP, lock, stock, and freeze tanks. And he couldn't have that. Frazier knew the Old Man wouldn't be content for very long to have that small body waiting in the vault, hanging over him day and night. In the end he'd have turned the switch himself.

So Frazier set up the fake equipment failure, the phony funeral, and took Duna to a place where she'd be safe.

Oh yeah, one other thing. Yesterday a bell rang in a private alert station that's manned twenty-four hours a day, just down the hall from where I sleep. Number Eight is awake and moving—somewhere. I've sent my men out to try to find him, but he seems to be an elusive character.

I'm waiting for him now. When he shows up, I hope I can convince him that what I'm doing is the right thing. If I can't—well, I've got all the weight on my side, but Steve Dravek at twenty was a hard man to beat.

We'll see.

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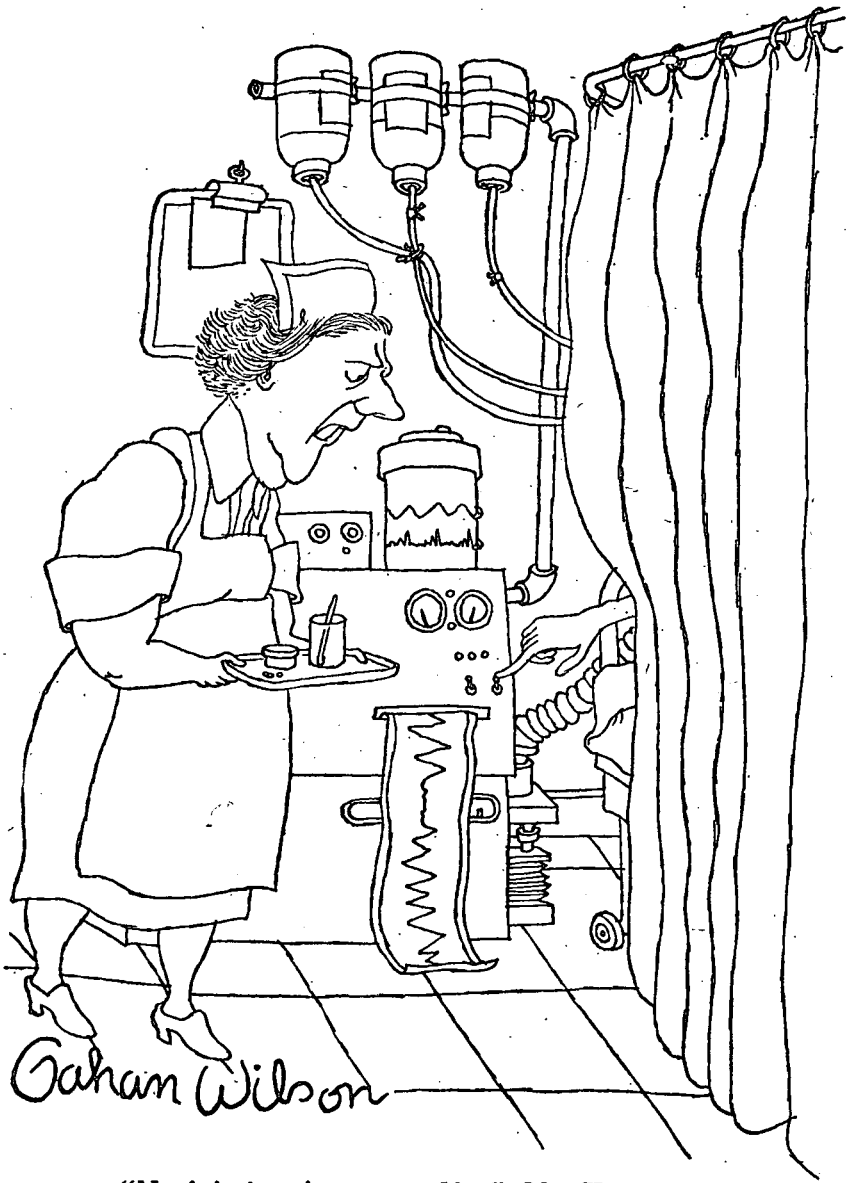

"No fair turning yourself off, Mr. Hasbrow!"

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Russell Kirk's THE CONSERVATIVE MIND *was published in 1953, and since then he has been regarded as the chief philosopher of the new American conservatism. Also in 1953, Dr. Kirk left the faculty of Michigan State College, noting with some misgivings the majority of students who "resent the minority who read books" as well as the administrators who "would establish colleges of necromancy if they thought anyone would enroll." Since then, Dr. Kirk has written widely on conservative thought and educational theory. He has also written fiction: primarily Gothick fantasy, "tales more of the outer darkness than of the twilight zone"* (SORWORTH PLACE, BEHIND THE STUMPS, *Nov.-Dec. 1962*). *Dr. Kirk's favorite recreation is walking; he says of this latest story that "it has more than a grain of true narration at the core of it, and the setting is genuine." He has indeed walked in some haunted places.*

BALGRUMMO'S HELL

by Russell Kirk

THE MOMENT THAT HORGAN had slipped through the pend, Jock Jamieson had glanced up, grunted, and run for his shotgun at the gate cottage. But Horgan, having long legs, had contrived to cosh Jock right on the threshold. Now Horgan had most of the night to lift the pictures out of Balgrummo Lodging.

Before Jock could close those rusty iron gates, Nan Stennis—in her improbable role of new night nurse to Lord Balgrummo—had stalled her car in the pend. In the rain, Jock couldn't possibly have made out Nan's face, and now Horgan pulled off the silk stocking of Nan's that he had worn over his own head. With Nan's help, he trussed and gagged Jock, the tough old nut breathing convulsively, and dragged him into a kitchen cupboard of the gate cottage, and turned the key on him. Jock's morning mate, and the morning nurse, wouldn't come to relieve him until seven o'clock. That left no one between Horgan and those paintings except Alexander Fillan

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Inchburn, tenth Baron Balgrummo, incredibly old, incredibly depraved, and incredibly decayed in Balgrummo Lodging, which he had not left for half a century.

In that nocturnal February drizzle, Nan shivered; perhaps she shuddered. Though there could have been no one within a quarter of a mile to hear them, she was whispering. "Rafe, can you really get through it without me? I hate to think of you going into that place all alone, darling."

Competent Rafe Horgan kissed her competently. She had left her husband for him, and she had been quite useful. He honestly meant to meet her at the Mayfair, by the end of the month, and take her to the Canaries; by that time, he should have disposed of the Romney portrait for a fat sum, to an assured Swiss collector with a Leeds agent, enabling Horgan to take his time in disposing of the other Balgrummo pictures. Nan could have lent him a hand inside Balgrummo Lodging, but it was important for her to establish an alibi; she would change automobiles with him now, drive into Edinburgh and show herself at a restaurant, and then take the midnight train to King's Cross. The principal trouble with operations like this was simply that too many people became involved, and some of them were given to bragging. But Nan was a close one, and Horgan had spent months planning.

The only real risk was that someone might discover his name wasn't Horgan. For that, however, a thorough investigation would be required. And who would think of investigating the past of Rafe Horgan, Esq., a South African gentleman of private means who now lived in a pleasant flat near Charlotte Square? Not Dr. Euphemia Inchburn, gray spinster who liked his smile and his talk; not T. M. Gillespie, Writer to the Signet, chairman of the trustees of Lord Balgrummo's Trust. With them, he had been patient and prudent, asking questions about Balgrummo Lodging only casually, in an antiquarian way. Besides, did he look as if he would carry the cosh? No, the police would be after every gang in Fossie housing estate, which sprawled almost to the policies of Balgrummo Lodging. Horgan's expenditure of charm, and even of money, would be repaid five thousand times over. The big obstacle had been Jock's shotgun, and that was overcome now.

"His high and mighty lordship's bedridden," Horgan told Nan, kissing her again, "and blind, too, they say. I'll finish here by three o'clock, girl. Ring me about teatime tomorrow, if you feel you must; but simply talk about the weather, Nan, when you do. You'll love Las Palmas."

He stood at the forgotten gate, watching Nan get into the car in which he had come and had

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parked in the shadow of the derelict linoleum-works that ran cheek by jowl with the north dyke of Balgrummo Lodging. When she had gone, he started up Nan's own inconspicuous black Ford, moving it far enough for him to shut the gates. He locked those gates with the big brass padlock that Jock had removed to admit "Nurse" Nan. Then, slowly and with only his dims showing, he drove up the avenue—rhododendron jungle pressing in from either side—that led to the seventeenth-century facade of Balgrummo Lodging.

"Uncle Alec and his house have everything," Dr. Effie Ichburn had said once: "Dry rot, wet rot, woodworm, death-watch beetle." Also, among those few who remembered Lord Balgrummo and Balgrummo Lodging, the twain had a most nasty repute. It was a positive duty to take the pictures out of that foul house and convey them into the possession of collectors who, if they would keep them no less private, certainly would care for them better.

Sliding out of the car with his dispatch-case of tools, Rafe Horgan stood at the dark door of Balgrummo Lodging. The front was the work of Sir William Bruce, they said, although part of the house was older. It all looked solid enough by night, however rotten the timbers and the man within. Horgan had taken Jamieson's big ring of keys from the gate cottage, but the heavy main door stood slightly ajar, anyway. No light showed anywhere. Before entering, Horgan took a brief complacent survey of the tall ashlar face of what T. M. Gillespie, that mordant stick of a solicitor, called "Balgrummo's Hell."

Living well enough by his wits, Horgan had come upon Balgrummo Lodging by good fortune, less than a month after he had found it convenient to roost in Edinburgh. In a car with false license-plates, he had driven out to Fossie housing estate in search of a certain rough customer who might do a job for him. Fossie, only seven years old but already slum, was the usual complex of crescents and terraces of drab council-houses. Horgan had taken a wrong turning and had found himself driving down a neglected and uninhabited old lane; behind the nasty brick wall on his right had been a derelict marshalling-yard for goods-waggons, declared redundant by Dr. Beeching of British Railways. On his left, he had passed the immense hulk of a disused linoleum-works, empty for several years, its every window-pane smashed by the lively bairns of Fossie.

Beyond the linoleum-factory, he had come upon a remarkably high old stone dyke, unpleasant shards of broken glass set thick in cement all along its top. Behind the wall he had made out the limbs

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and trunks of limes and beeches, a forest amidst suburbia. Abruptly, a formal ancient pend or vaulted gateway had loomed up. On either side, a seventeenth-century stone beast-effigy kept guard, life-size almost: a lion and a griffin, but so hacked and battered by young vandals as to be almost unrecognizable. The griffin's whole head was lacking.

So much Horgan had seen at a glance, taking it that these were the vacant policies of some demolished or ruined mansion-house. He had driven on to the end of the street, hoping to circle back to the housing-estate, but had found himself in a cul-de-sac, the Fettinch burn flowing through bogs beyond the brick wall at the end. This triangle of wooded policies, hemmed in by goods-yards, wrecked factory, and polluted streams, must be the last scrap of some laird's estate of yesteryear, swallowed but not yet digested by the city's fringe. Probably the squalor and unhealthiness of the low site had deterred Edinburgh or Midlothian—he wasn't sure within which boundary it lay—from building on it another clutch of council-houses for the Fossie scheme.

Swinging round at the lane's terminal wall, Horgan had gone slowly back past the massive pend, where the harling was dropping from the rubble. To his surprise, he had noticed a gate-lodge, apparently habitable, just within the iron grille of the gates; and a little wood-smoke had been spiralling up from the chimney. Could there be anything worth liberating beyond those gates? He had stopped, and had found an iron bell-pull that functioned. When he had rung, a tall fellow, with the look of a retired constable, had emerged from the gate-cottage and had conversed with him, taciturnly, in broad Scots, through the locked grille.

Horgan had asked for directions to a certain crescent in the housing-scheme, and had got them. Then he had inquired the name of this place. "Balgrummo Lodgin', sir"—with a half-defensive frown. On impulse, Horgan had suggested that he would like to see the house (which, he gathered, must be standing, for he could make out beyond the trees some high dormers and roofs).

"Na, na; Himself's no receivin', ye ken." This had been uttered with a kind of incredulity at the question being put.

Growing interested, Horgan had professed himself to be something of a connoisseur of seventeenth-century domestic architecture. Where might he apply for permission to view the exterior, at any rate? He had been given to understand, surlily, that it would do no good: but everything was in the hands of Lord Balgrummo's Trust. The Trust's solicitor and chairman was a Mr. T. M. Gilles-

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pie, of Reid, Gillespie, and MacIlwraith, Hanover Street.

Thus Balgrummo Lodging had been added to Rafe Horgan's list of divers projects. A few days later, he had scraped acquaintance with Gillespie, a dehydrated bachelor. Initially, he had not mentioned Balgrummo Lodging, but had talked in Gillespie's chambers about a hypothetical Miss Horgan in Glasgow, allegedly an aunt of his, a spinster of large means, who was thinking of a family trust. Mr. Gillespie, he had heard it said, was experienced in the devising and management of such trusts. As venture-capital, a cheque from Horgan had even been made out to Mr. Gillespie, in payment for general advice upon getting up a conceivable Janet Horgan Estates, Ltd.

Gillespie, he had discovered, was a lonely solictor who could be cultivated, and who had a dry relish for dry sherry. After a bottle, Gillespie might talk more freely than a solicitor ought to talk. They came to dine together fairly frequently—after Horgan had learnt, from a chance remark which he affected to receive casually, that some good pictures remained at the Lodging. As the weeks elapsed, they were joined for a meal, once and again, by Gillespie's old friend Dr. Euphemia Inchburn, Lord Balgrummo's niece, a superannuated gynecologist. Horgan had turned on all his charm, and Dr. Inchburn had slipped into garrulity.

Perceiving that he really might be on to a good thing, Horgan had poked into old gazeteers which might mention Balgrummo Lodging; and, as he obtained from his new friends some hint of the iniquities of the tenth Baron Balgrummo, he looked into old newspaper-files. He knew a little about pictures, as he did about a number of things; and by consulting the right books and catalogues, he ascertained that on the rotting walls of Balgrummo Lodging there still must hang some highly valuable family portraits—though not family portraits only—none of them exhibited anywhere since 1913. Gillespie was interested only in Scottish portrait-painters, and not passionately in them; Horgan judged it imprudent to question Dr. Effie Inchburn overmuch on the subject, lest his inquisitiveness be fixed in her memory. But he became reasonably well satisfied that Lord Balgrummo, senescent monster, must possess an Opie; a Raeburn; a Ramsay or two; perhaps even three Wilkies; a good Reynolds, possibly, and a Constable; a very good Romney; a Gainsborough, it appeared, and (happy prospect) a Hogarth; two small canvasses by William Etty; a whole row of reputed Knellers; once, and just conceivably still, a Cranach and a Holbein were to be seen at the Lodging. The tenth

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baron's especial acquisition, about 1911, had been an enormous Fuseli, perhaps unknown to compilers of catalogues, and (judging from one of Dr. Inchburn's grimaces) probably obscene. There were more pictures—the devil knew what.

Perhaps some rare books might be found in the library, but Horgan was too little of a bibliophile to pick them out in a hurry. The silver and that sort of thing presumably were in a bank—it would have been risky to inquire. Anyone but a glutton would be content with those pictures, for one night's work.

Lethargy, and the consequences of permanent confinement to his house, naturally had made Lord Balgrummo neglect his inheritance. As the decades had slipped by, he had permitted his trustees to sell nearly everything he owned, except Balgrummo Lodging—once a residence of convenience, near Edinburgh, for the Inchburns, later a dower-house—and those pictures. "After all, never going out, Alec has to look at *something*," Dr. Inchburn had murmured.

Sufficient intelligence obtained, still Horgan faced the difficulty of entering the house without the peril and expense of a gang-raid, and of getting out undetected with those pictures. An attempt had been made several years before. On that occasion, Jock Jamieson, the night porter—"warden" would have been a better style—had shot to death one burglar and wounded another while they were on a ladder. Jamieson and his day mates (one of them the constable-type with whom Horgan had talked at the gate) were hard, vigilant men—and, like Lord Balgrummo's nurses, excellently paid. Time had been when it seemed at least as important to keep Lord Balgrummo in (though he had given his word never to leave the policies) as to keep predators out. Gillespie had implied that the police indulged in the peculiar porters of Balgrummo Lodging a certain readiness in the use of firearms. So Horgan's expedition had been most painstakingly plotted, and it had been necessary to wait months for the coincidence of favorable circumstances, all things being held in readiness.

The presence of a nurse in the house all round the clock was a further vexation; Horgan had not relished the prospect of pursuing a frantic nurse through that crumbling warren of a place. Should she escape through some back door . . . So when, only yesterday, Gillespie had mentioned that the night nurse had quit ("Nerves, as usual, in that house—and his lordship a disagreeable patient"), and that they had not yet found a replacement, Horgan knew his moment had arrived.

For one night, Jamieson had

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been required to do double duty, watching the policies and looking in on Lord Balgrummo every hour. Jock Jamieson, for all his toughness, probably liked being inside the place at night no more than did the nurses. So doubtless Jock had rejoiced when a la-di-dah feminine voice (Nan Stennis', of course) had informed him late that evening that she was calling on behalf of Mr. Gillespie, and that a new night nurse would make her appearance, in an hour or so, in her own car.

It had gone smoothly enough. Jock had opened the gate at Nan's honk, and then it had been up to Horgan, in the shadows. Had Jock been ten years younger, and less given to beer, he might have got his hands on the shotgun before Horgan could have reached him. But though disliking unnecessary roughness, Horgan had coshed men before, and he coshed Jock swiftly and well. No one came down that obscure lane after dark —few, indeed, in daylight. Therefore the investment in drinks and dinners for Gillespie and the Inchburn old maid, and the expenditure of Horgan's hours, now would be compensated for at an hourly rate of return beyond the dreams of avarice. Swinging his handsome dispatch-case, Horgan entered Balgrummo Lodging.

Within the chilly entrance-hall, the first thing Horgan noticed was the pervasive odor of dry rot. With this stench of doom, what wonder they had to pay triple wages to any nurse! Condemned to solitude, neglectful of business, and latterly penurious, Lord Balgrummo had postponed repairs until the cost of restoring the Lodging would have been gigantic. Even could he have found the money without selling some of his pictures, old Balgrummo probably would not have saved the house; he had no heirs of his body, the entail had been broken long before, and his heir-presumptive—Dr. Effie—never would choose to live in this desolation screened by the tumbledown linoleum-works. There remained only the question as to which would first tumble into atoms—Lord Balgrummo or his prison-mansion.

Horgan sent the beam of his big electric torch round the hall. It flashed across the surface of what appeared to be a vast Canaletto—a prospect of Ravenna, perhaps. Was it the real article, or only from Canaletto's school? Horgan wished he knew whether it were worth the difficulty of taking and concealing, its size considered. Well, he would leave it to the last, securing the certified goods first.

He had known there was no electric light in Balgrummo Lodging: nothing had been improved there—or much repaired—since 1913. He found, however, elaborate bronze gas-brackets. After fumbling, he found also that he

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did not know how to light them; or perhaps the gas was turned off, here in the hall. No matter: the torch would suffice, even if the black caverns beyond its ray were distressing.

Before he went to work, he must have a glance at old Balgrummo, to be quite sure that the crazy old creature couldn't totter out to do some feeble mischief. (In this house, more than fifty years before, he had done great mischief indeed.) Where would his bedroom be? On the second story, at the front, just above the library, likely enough, judging from the plan of the Lodging, at which Horgan had once managed a hasty glance in Gillespie's chambers. Hanging the torch about his neck, Horgan made his way up the broad oak staircase, at first leaning on the balustrade—but presently touching that rail only gingerly, since here and there, even though he wore gloves, it felt spongy to the touch, and trembled in its rottenness when he put too much weight upon it.

At the first-floor turning of the stair, Horgan paused. Had anything scraped or shuffled down there below, down in the black well of the ground floor? Of course it couldn't have, unless it were a rat. (Balgrummo kept no dogs: "The brutes don't live long at the Lodging," Gillespie had murmured in an obscure aside.) How had those night nurses endured this situation, at whatever wages? One reason why Balgrummo Lodging hadn't been pillaged before this, Horgan ruminated, was the ghastly reputation of the place, lingering over five decades. Few enterprising lads, even from Fossie housing estate, would be inclined to venture into the auld bogle nobleman's precincts. Well, that ghostly wind had blown him good. No one could be more effectively rational than Rafe Horgan, who wouldn't fret about blood spilt before the First World War. Still, indubitably this was an oppressive house—stagnant, stagnant.

"Haunted?" Dr. Effie Inchburn had replied hesitantly to Horgan's jocular inquiry. "If you mean haunted by dead ancestors, Major Horgan—why, no more than most old houses here in Scotland, I suppose. Who would be troubled, after so many generations, by old General Sir Angus Inchburn in his Covenanting jackboots? Ghostly phenomena, or so I've read, seldom linger long after a man's or a woman's death and burial. But if you ask whether there's something fey at work in the house—oh, I certainly suppose so."

Having paused to polish her spectacles, Dr. Effie continued calmly enough: "That's Uncle Alec's fault. He's not present merely in one room, you know; he fills the house, every room, every hour. Presumably I seem silly to you, Major Horgan, but my impulses

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won't let me visit Balgrummo more than I must, even if Alec does mean to leave everything to me. Balgrummo Lodging is like a saturated sponge, dripping with the shame and the longing of Alexander Fillan Inchburn. Can you understand that my uncle loathes what he did, and yet might do it again—even the worst of it—if there were opportunity? The horror of Balgrummo Lodging isn't Lord Balgrummo nine-tenths dead; it's Balgrummo one-tenth alive, but in torment."

The tedious old girl-doctor was nearly as cracked as her noble uncle, Horgan thought. Actually he had learned from some interesting research the general character of Lord Balgrummo's offenses so long ago—acts which would have produced the hanging of anyone but a peer, in those days. Horgan nevertheless had amused himself by endeavoring, slyly and politely, to force Dr. Effie to tell him just why Balgrummo had been given the choice of standing trial for his life (by the Lords, of course, as a peer, which might have damaged the repute of that body) or of being kept in a kind of perpetual house-arrest, without sentence being passed by anyone. The latter choice would not have been offered—and accepted—even so, but for the general belief that he must be a maniac.

As he had anticipated, Dr. Euphemia had turned prude. "Poor Alec was very naughty when he was young. There were others as bad as himself, but he took the whole blame on his shoulders. He was told that if he would swear never to go out, all his life, and to receive no visitors except members of his family or his solicitors, no formal charges would be pressed against him. They required him to put everything he owned into trust; and the trustees were to engage the men to watch the policies of Balgrummo Lodging, and the servants. All the original set of trustees are dead and buried; Mr. Gillespie and I weren't much more than babies when Uncle Alec had his Trouble."

From Gillespie, later, Rafe Horgan had learned more about that Trouble. But what was he doing, pausing in the darkness of the second-floor corridor to reminisce? A hasty inspection by the torch showed him that the Knellers, all great noses, velvets, and bosoms, were hung on this floor. And there was the Gainsborough, a good one, though it badly needed cleaning: Margaret, Lady Ross, second daughter of the fifth Lord Balgrummo. The worm had got into the picture-frame, but the canvas seemed to be in decent condition, he made out on closer examination. Well, Horgan meant to cut his pictures out of their frames, to save time and space. First, though, he must look in upon Himself.

The corridor was all dust and

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mildew. A single charwoman, Gillespie had mentioned, came a few hours daily, Monday through Friday, to keep Balgrummo's bedroom and small parlor neat, to clean the stairs and to wash dishes in the kitchen. Otherwise, the many rooms and passages of the Lodging were unceasingly shuttered against sun and moon, and the damask might fall in tatters from the walls, the ceilings drip with cobwebs, for all old Balgrummo cared. Nearly every room was left locked, though the keys, all but a few, were in the bunch (each with its metal tag) that Horgan had taken from unconscious Jock. Even Gillespie, who waited on his client four or five times a year, never had contrived to see the chapel. Balgrummo kept the chapel key in his own pocket, Gillespie fancied—and, over coffee and brandy, had mentioned this, together with other trivia, to Horgan. "It was in the chapel, you see, Rafe, that the worst of the Trouble happened."

Acquiring that chapel key was an additional reason why Horgan must pay his respects to Lord Balgrummo—though he relished that necessity less, somehow, with every minute that elapsed. Henry Fuseli's most indecorous painting might be in that chapel; for the tenth baron's liturgy and ritual, fifty years before, had been a synthesis of Benin witch-rites with memories of Scots diabolism, and whatever might excite the frantic fancy had been employed—all gross images. So, at least, Horgan had surmised from what he had garnered from the old newspaper files, and what Gillespie had let drop.

Uncertain of quite where he was in the house, Horgan tried the knobs of three doors in that corridor. The first two were locked; and it was improbable that the trustees ever had gone so far, even when Balgrummo was stronger, as to have him locked into his rooms at night. But the third door opened creakingly. Flashing round his light, Horgan entered an old-fashioned parlor, with what appeared to be two bona-fide Wilkie landscapes on opposite walls. Across the parlor, which was scarcely bigger than a dressing-room, a mahogany door stood half open. How silent! Yet something scraped or ticked faintly—a morose deathwatch beetle in the panelling, probably. Despite irrational misgivings, Horgan compelled himself to pass through the inner doorway.

The beam of his torch swept to a Queen Anne bed. In it lay, motionless and with eyes shut, an extremely old man, skin and bone under a single sheet and a single blanket. A coal fire smouldered in the grate, so the room was not altogether dark. Horgan's flesh crept perceptibly—but that would be the old rumors, and the old truths, about this enfeebled thing in the

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bed. "In his prime, we called him Ozymandias," Gillespie had put it. But Lord Balgrummo was past obscenities and atrocities now.

"Hello, Alec!" Horgan was loud and jocular. His right hand rested on the cosh in his coat pocket. "Alec, you old toad, I've come for your pictures." But Alexander Fillan Inchburn, the last of a line that went back to a bastard of William the Lion, did not stir or speak.

T. M. Gillespie was proud of Lord Balgrummo, as the most remarkable person whose business ever had come his way. "Our Scots Giles de Rais," Gillespie had chuckled aridly while enjoying a Jamaican cigar from Horgan's case, "probably would not be found insane by a board of medical examiners—not even after fifty years of restriction to his own private Hell. I don't think it was from malice that the procurator-fiscal of that day recommended Balgrummo Lodging—where the capital offenses had been committed—as the place of isolated residence: it merely happened that this particular house of Lord Balgrummo's was secluded enough to keep his lordship out of the public eye (for he might have been stoned), and yet near enough to the city for police surveillance, during the earlier decades. I take it that the police have forgotten his existence, or almost forgotten, by this time: for the past three or four years, he wouldn't have been able to walk unaided so far as the gate-cottage."

It was something of a relief to Horgan, finding that Lord Balgrummo was past giving coherent evidence in a court of law—and therefore need not be given the quietus. Even though they no longer hanged anybody for anything, and even though Balgrummo could have been eliminated in thirty seconds by a pillow over his face, the police pursued a homicide much more energetically than they did a picture-fancier.

But was this penny-dreadful monster of fifty years ago, with his white beard now making him sham-venerable in this four-poster, still among the living? Horgan almost could see the bones through his skin; Balgrummo might have come to his end during the hour or so since Jamieson had made his rounds. To be sure, Horgan took a mirror from the dressing-table and held it close to the pallid sunken face. Setting his torch on its base, he inspected the mirror's surface; yes, there was a faint moist film, so the tenth baron still breathed.

Balgrummo must be stone-deaf, or in coma. Dr. Effie had said he had gone almost blind recently. Was it true? Horgan nearly yielded to a loathsome impulse to roll back those withered eyelids, but he reminded himself that somehow he wouldn't be able to endure seeing his own image in this dying man's malign pupils.

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The coshing of Jock, the nervous partial exploration of this dismal house, the sight of loathsome old Balgrummo on the edge of dissolution—these trials had told on Horgan, old hand though he was at predatory ventures. With all the hours left to him, it would do no harm to sit for a few minutes in this easy chair, almost as if he were Balgrummo's nurse—keeping watch on the bed, surely, to make certain that Balgrummo wasn't (in reason's spite) shamming in some way—and to review in his brain the pictures he ought to secure first, and the rooms in which he was likely to find them.

But it would be heartening to have more light than his torch. Never turning his back on the bed, Horgan contrived to light a gas-bracket near the door; either these gas-fittings were simpler than those below stairs, or he had got the trick of the operation. The interior shutters of this bedroom being closed, there wasn't the faintest danger of a glimmer of light being perceived by chance passers-by—not that anybody conceivably could pass by Balgrummo Lodging on a rainy midnight.

Lord Balgrummo seemed no less grisly in the flood of gaslight. However much exhausted by strain, you couldn't think of going to sleep, for the briefest nap, in a chair only six feet distant from this unspeaking and unspeakable thing in the bed; not when you knew just how "very naughty," in Dr. Euphemia's phrase, Balgrummo had been. The Trouble for which he had paid had been only the culmination of a series of arcane episodes, progressing from hocus-pocus to the ultimate horror.

"No, not lunatic, in any ordinary definition of the term," Gillespie had declared. "Balgrummo recognized the moral character of his acts—aye, more fully than does the average sensual man. Also he was, and is, quite rational, in the sense that he can transact some ordinary business of life when pressed. He fell into a devil of a temper when we proposed to sell some of his pictures to pay for putting the house and the policies in order; he knows his rights, and that the trustees can't dispose of his plenishings against his explicit disapproval. He's civil enough, in his mocking way, to his niece Effie, when she calls—and to me, when I have to see him. He still reads a good deal—or did, until his sight began to fail—though only books in his own library; half the ceiling has fallen in the library, but he shuffles through the broken plaster on the shaky floor."

On the right of the bed-head, there hung an indubitable Constable; on the left, a probable Etty. The two were fairly small, and Horgan could take them whenever he wished. But his throat was dry, this house being so damned dusty. A decanter stood on the dressing-

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table, a silver brandy label round its neck, and by it two cut-glass tumblers. "Not a drop for you, Alec?" inquired Horgan, grinning defiantly at the silent man on the bed. He seated himself in the velvet-upholstered armchair again and drank the brandy neat.

"No, one can't say," Gillespie had continued (in that last conversation which now seemed so far away and long ago) "that his lordship is wholly incompetent to take a hand in the management of his affairs. It's rather that he's *distant* —preoccupied, in more senses than one. He has to exert his will to bring his consciousness back from wherever it drifts—and one can see that the effort isn't easy for him."

"He's in a brown study, you mean, Tom?" Horgan had inquired, not much interested at that time.

"It's not the phrase I would choose, Rafe. Dr. Effie talks about the "astral body" and such rubbish, as if she half believed in it—you've heard her. That silliness was a principal subject of Balgrummo's 'researches' for two years before the Trouble, you understand; his Trouble was the culmination of those experiments. But of course . . ."

"Of course he's only living in the past," Horgan had put in.

"*Living*? Who really knows what that word means?" T. M. Gillespie, W.S., devoted to the memory of David Hume, professed a contempt for rationalism as profound as his contempt for superstition. "And why say *past*? Did you never think that a man might be ossified in time? What you call Balgrummo's past, Rafe, may be Balgrummo's own present, as much as this table-talk of ours is the present for you and me. The Trouble is his lordship's obsessive reality. Attaining to genuine evil requires strict application to the discipline, eh? Balgrummo is not merely remembering the events of what you and I call 1913, or even 're-living' those events. No, I suspect it's this: he's embedded in those events, like a beetle in amber. For Balgrummo, one certain night in Balgrummo Lodging continues forever.

"When Dr. Effie and I distract him by raising the trivia of current business, he has to depart from *his* reality, and gropes briefly through a vexatious little dream-world in which his niece and his solicitor are insubstantial shadows. In Alexander Inchburn's consciousness, I mean, there is no remembrance and no anticipation. He's not 'living in the past', not engaging in an exercise of retrospection; for him, Time is restricted to one certain night, and space is restricted to one certain house, or perhaps one certain room. Passionate experience has chained him to a fixed point in Time, so to speak. But Time, as so many have said,

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is a human convention, not an objective reality. Can you prove that your Time is more substantial than his?"

Horgan hadn't quite followed Gillespie, and said so.

"I put it this way, Rafe," Gillespie had gone on, didactically. "What's the time of day in Hell? Why, Hell is timeless—or so my grandfather told me, and he was minister at the Tron. Hell knows no future and no past, but only the everlasting moment of damnation. Also Hell is spaceless; or, conceivably, it's a locked box, damnably confining. Here we have Lord Balgrummo shut up perpetually in his box called Balgrummo Lodging, where the fire is not quenched and the worm never dieth. One bloody and atrocious act, committed in that very box, literally is his enduring *reality*. He's not recollecting; he's experiencing, here and (for him) now. All the frightful excitement of that Trouble, the very act of profanation and terror, lifts him out of what we call Time. Between Dr. Effie and me on the one side, and distant Balgrummo on the other, a great gulf is fixed.

"If you like, you can call that gulf Time. For that gulf, I praise whatever gods there be. For if any man's or woman's consciousness should penetrate to Balgrummo's consciousness, to his time-scheme, to his world beyond the world—or if, through some vortex of mind and soul, anyone were sucked into that narrow place of torment—then the intruder would end like *this*." Gillespie, tapping his cigar upon an ash-tray, knocked into powder a long projection of gray ash. "Consumed, Rafe."

Scratch the canny Scot, Horgan had thought then, even the pedant of the law, and you find the bogle-dreading Pict. "I suppose you mean, really, Tom, that he's out of his head," Horgan had commented, bored with tipsy and unprofitable speculation.

"I mean precisely the contrary, Rafe. I mean that anyone who encounters Lord Balgrummo ought to be on his guard against being drawn into Balgrummo's head. In what you and I designate as 1913 (though, as I said, dates have no significance for Balgrummo), his lordship was a being of immense moral power, magnetic and seductive. I'm not being facetious. Moral power is a catalyst, and can work for good or for evil. Even now, I'm acutely uneasy when I sit with Balgrummo, aware that this old man might absorb me. I shouldn't wish to stir those sleeping fires by touching his passions. That's why Balgrummo had to be confined, five decades of ours ago—but not simply because he might be *physically* dangerous. Yet I can't explain to you; you've not watched Balgrummo in what you call his 'brown study', and you never will, happy man." Their

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conversation then had shifted to Miss Janet Horgan's hypothetical trust.

Yet Gillespie had been a bad prophet. Here he was, clever Rafe Horgan, man of supple talents and slippery fingers, leisurely watching Lord Balgrummo in his brown study—or in his coma, more precisely—and finishing his lordship's decanter of praiseworthy brandy. You had to remember to keep watching that cadaverous face above the sheet, though; if you let your eyes close even for a second, *his* might open, for all you could tell. After all, you were only a guest in Balgrummo's very own little Hell. The host mustn't be permitted to forget his manners.

Now where would the expiring monster keep his privy effects—the key to that chapel on the floor above, for instance? Steady, Rafe boy: keep your eyes on his face as you open his bedside drawer. Right you are, Rafe; you always were lucky; the nurse had put old Alec's three keys on a chain, along with watch and pocket-comb and such effects, into this very drawer. One of these keys should let you into the chapel, Rafe. Get on with you; you've drunk all the brandy a reasonable man needs.

"Don't you mean to give me a guided tour, Alec? Stately homes of Scotia, and all that? Won't you show me your chapel, where you and your young chums played your dirty little games, and got your fingers burned? Cheerio, then; don't blame me if you can't be bothered to keep an eye on your goods and chattels."

Back away from him, toward the door, Rafe. Let him lie. How had Dr. Effie put it? "He fills the house, every room, every hour." Cheerless thought, that, fit for a scrawny old maid. The talkative Euphemia must have nearly as many screws loose as had her uncle; probably she envied him his revels.

"I really believe the others led Uncle Alec into the whole business, gradually," Dr. Effie had droned on, the last time he had seen her. "But once in, he took command, as natural to him. He was out in Nigeria before people called it Nigeria, you know, and in Guinea, and all up and down that coast. He began collecting materials for a monograph on African magic—raising the dead, and summoning devils, and more. Presently he was dabbling in the spells, not merely collecting them—so my father told me, forty years ago. After Uncle Alec came home, he didn't stop dabbling. Some very reputable people dabbled when I was a girl. But the ones around Uncle Alec weren't in the least reputable.

"Charlatans? Not quite; I wish they had been. They fed Balgrummo's appetite. Yet he was after knowledge, at least in the be-

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ginning; and though he may have boggled, more than once, at the steps he had to descend toward the source of that knowledge, he grew more eager as he pressed down into the dark. Or so father guessed; father became one of Uncle Alec's original trustees, and felt it his duty to collect some evidence of what had happened—though it sickened father, the more he uncovered of his brother's queerness.

"Toward the end, Balgrummo may have forgotten about knowledge and have leaped into passion and power. One didn't *learn* what one had sought to apprehend; one *became* the mystery, possessing it and possessed by it.

"No, not charlatans—not altogether. They took a fortune out of Uncle Alec, one way or another; and he had to pay even more to keep people quiet in those years. They had told Balgrummo, in effect, that they could raise the Devil—though they didn't put it in quite that crude way. Yet they must have been astounded by their success, when it came at last. Balgrummo had paid before, and he has paid ever since. Those others paid, too—especially the man and the woman who died. They had thought they were raising the Devil *for* Lord Balgrummo. But as it turned out, they raised the Devil *through* Balgrummo and *in* Balgrummo. After that, everything fell to pieces."

But to hell with recollections of Euphemia Inchburn, Rafe. Dry rot, wet rot, woodworm, deathwatch beetle: the Devil take them all, and Balgrummo Lodging besides. One thing the Devil shouldn't have—these pictures. Get on to the chapel, Rafe, and then give Nan the glad news. Thanks for the brandy, Alec: I mightn't have got through the business without it.

Yet one dram too many, possibly? Horgan was aware of a certain giddiness, but not fully aware of how he had got up those Stygian stairs, or of what he had done with his torch. Had he turned the key in the lock of the chapel door? He couldn't recall having done so. Still, here he was in the chapel.

No need for the torch; the room, a long gallery, was lit by all those candle-flames in the many-branched candlesticks. Who kept Lord Balgrummo's candles alight? The stench of decay was even stronger here than it had been down below. Under foot, the floorboards were almost oozing, and mushroom rot squashed beneath his shoes. Some of the panelling had fallen away altogether. High up in the shifting shadows, the moulded-plaster ceiling sagged and bulged as if the lightest touch would bring it all down in slimy little particles.

Back of the altar—the altar of the catastrophic act of Balgrum-

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mo's Trouble—hung the unknown Fuseli. It was no painting, but an immense cartoon, and the most uninhibited museum-director never would dare show it to the most broad-minded critics of art. Those naked and contorted forms, the instruments of torment fixed upon their flesh, were the inversion of the Agony. Even Horgan could not bear to look at them long.

Look at them? All those candles were guttering. Two winked out simultaneously; others failed. As the little flames sank toward extinction, Rafe Horgan became aware that he was not alone.

It was as if presences skulked in corners or behind the broken furniture. And there could be no retreat toward the door; for something approached from that end of the gallery. As if Horgan's extremity of terror fed it, the shape took on increasing clarity of outline, substance, strength.

Tall, arrogant, implacable, mindless, it drifted toward him. The face was Balgrummo's, or what Balgrummo's must have been fifty years before, but possessed: eager, eager, eager; all appetite, passion, yearning after the abyss. In one hand glittered a long knife.

Horgan bleated and ran. He fell against the cobwebby altar. And in the final act of destruction, something strode across the great gulf of Time.

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Hugo Correa (THE LAST ELEMENT, *April 1962*) *writes from his native Chile that this story is based on the psychological principle of introjection, in which human organs and senses appear to incorporate themselves into the machinery that they drive or handle: e. g., pilots, who feel that their arms are projected into the wings of the aircraft and their legs into its wheels, to the point that on landing they seem to feel that they touch ground with their own feet. The example here is a good deal more encompassing—and alarming.*

ALTER EGO

by Hugo Correa

"HERE IS YOUR ALTER EGO, SIR. Kindly sign the receipt."

Antonio opened the box and stepped back in amazement. There he was, arms close to the body, completely naked and motionless. If the upright position were not unnatural in a sleeper, he would have attempted to wake the android, so true to life did the color of the skin look, the little wrinkles beginning to show around the eyes, the thin lips, the high forehead. The straight hair was carefully combed, like that of its human counterpart.

He took up the control box and, following the instructions, put the android in motion. It walked slowly and naturally, with none of the grotesque movements so typical of automatons in the past. It was just as though it actually possessed bones, muscles, nerves and the organs of a living being. Antonio made it go through the elementary motions—sit, dress, light a cigarette, scratch its ear. "If android-owners wish to enjoy them," said the instructions manual, "they must first study their own selves very carefully, at least as to their mimicry, gestures, gait, etc."

Antonio, expert now at handling his double, put on the introjection helmet. For a moment his eyes blinked in the dark. But once the ocular switch was turned on he recovered the use of his eyes. The living room looked as if he were seeing it from another angle. What was it? Simply that he was beginning to see through the android's eyes. Alter Ego was standing in the middle of the room facing the door, blinking naturally. The instru-

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ments moved the synthetic eyelids simultaneously with Antonio's. The man pressed a button and the double turned. He could see himself sitting in the chair, his head hidden in the helmet, the controls on his knee. Once the audio channel was working there was no doubt that he was now in the middle of the room; he could hear the street noises and those he made when shifting his position in the armchair. And smell. How to breathe through Alter Ego. The odorophones gave him the sensation of air breathed elsewhere. He tried the voice of his duplicate self; as soon as Alter Ego opened his mouth, Antonio heard himself speaking from the middle of the room.

"How are you, Antonio? You've been born again. Don't you feel like a fish in a bowl when they've just changed the water?"

Antonio listened to his own voice with complacency. He had Alter Ego walk about the room, took him to the window and, leaning out, watched the bright city under a burning sky sprinkled with helicopters. Everything looked more beautiful than when he used his own eyes; the sky was bluer and more luminous, the skyscrapers showed gayer and brighter colors. Yes, Alter Ego was showing him the true face of things. The sensations that he received through his double made him feel suddenly at peace with humankind. In his imagination the emotions of youth revived, the memories that time had slowly erased leaving behind faint images willingly or unwittingly forgotten. But now he felt overcome by a strange courage and a desire for remembrance. He could look over his past life serenely, recall youthful thoughts, aspirations, the way he had little by little given up what he loved most in order to make a position for himself.

"Remember when you wanted to be an actor and play The Emperor Jones? How you went about for weeks with your mind on his soliloquies? How you made love to Valentina, the girl who attended dramatic school with you and encouraged you because she believed in you?"

Alter Ego spoke with a clear, resonant voice, his gestures those of a man used to the stage. He lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, then let out a thin wisp of smoke. He stopped in front of a picture of Antonio at his desk, a satisfied smile on his face, photographs, notices, billboards all round him.

"There's nothing wrong with selling toothpaste, particularly when it's a good product and properly manufactured. After all, it even has a social function; it ensures white teeth and a pleasant breath. Did you ever think of Jones's lines to Smithers as related to your own activities: 'Ain't a man's talkin' big what makes him big—long as he makes folks believe

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it?' You managed that as a salesman. Trouble was you never believed the big things that the great salesman Antonio said."

Alter Ego inhaled deeply, and through the bluish cloud surveyed the man in the chair whose face was hidden by the helmet. Wonders of electronics! The papillophones gave him the taste and slight heat of the smoke.

"Smoking by remote control—what a boon for today's practical men who are anxious to do all things without committing themselves too much! You get the same enjoyment that the smoker does while you run none of the risks. It is the hedonistic principle fulfilled."

Alter Ego opened an antique cupboard and turned to Antonio with an indefinable smile.

"A museum piece, as so many men are. Aren't most men today just museum pieces after all? To begin with, they are unable to fulfill their own aspirations. They all stop halfway. You're no exception; you wanted to be an actor, and you ended up selling toothpaste because there was more money in it. You gave up Valentina because she was humble, had no ambition. You had friends, true ones, people with whom you could talk about any number of useless things. Useless? Your new acquaintances only understand the language of finance. 'Is there money in that?' they ask you when you innocently attempt to get them out of their easy chairs, showing them your inner world where your aspirations are beginning to rust, fatally, resignedly, like metal corroded by oxide. You did learn to talk like them, though. Not any better! There are no levels in that world."

Alter Ego finished smoking, put out the cigarette with a theatrical gesture and faced Antonio, pointing at him accusingly.

"And now, will your mechanical double do what you don't dare do with your own hands?"

The android stood motionless, looking at the silent helmet. A dense silence floated in the room. The glass eyes glowed. Slowly, Alter Ego turned to the open cupboard. His face hardened. He took out a pistol, examined it critically and advanced towards the man with a curious solemnity, as though walking through a temple while a ceremony is being held.

"Man is the supreme inventor. He made these weapons to kill men, and doubles to pass judgment on himself."

After the briefest pause he added, drily:

"The cycle is closed," and carefully aimed at the figure in the chair. ◀

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Robert Nathan is the author of fifty volumes of poetry and prose, including PORTRAIT OF JENNIE, SO LOVE RETURNS, THE WEANS, *and, most recently,* STONECLIFF, *a novel about an eminent writer who has shouded himself with mystery. From this body of work he has acquired a reputation as a master of the improbable, as demonstrated below in one of Mr. Nathan's rare short story appearances.*

ENCOUNTER IN THE PAST

by Robert Nathan

I REMEMBER THAT AFTERNOON very well: I had stopped in at the Faculty Club to pass an hour or two between classes, and had found Maitland, the Anthropologist, standing at the window, looking out at the campus with its lozenges of green grass and sun-dusted trees. He beckoned me over. "Look there," he said.

I saw only a group of students on their way from one class to another. "They're in their usual Spring foliage," I said. "They do it every year."

He seemed curiously depressed. "It's sad," he said. "Down the old garden path."

I shrugged, and turned away, but he stopped me. "You don't know what I mean, do you?" he said. It was more of a statement than a question.

He took my silence for a negative answer. "They are here to acquire knowledge," he said. "And we are here to give it to them."

"So?" I asked.

He stared out at the campus again, and sighed. "Knowledge is evil," he said. "Have you ever stopped to think about that? It says so in the Bible."

"Oh, that!" I said, and smiled. "The myth of Eden and the Tree."

I rather expected him to smile

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with me, but he remained grave. "Ah," he said, "the myth. But we are beginning to find out that what we took for myths are based upon fact."

I realized that he was serious, and decided to humor him. He was naturally a mournful fellow, but I liked him; as far as I knew, he had never done anybody any harm. "Well, of course," I said carefully, "a great deal of the Bible has turned out to be historically correct. There really was a Flood; and Sodom was built over subterranean sulphur springs . . ."

He stopped me with an impatient movement of his hand. "Don't you find anything strange about Genesis 2: 17?" he asked.

I had to think for a moment before I could pin-point it. "That's the one about the apple, isn't it?"

He nodded. "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil thou shalt not eat of it," he said.

"Well, yes," I said. "It makes sense, I suppose . . . of a sort. I mean. Innocence . . ."

"What is strange," said Maitland, "is the moment in time when man was first told to beware of knowledge. Or, at least, that moment when it was first mentioned in our history. It was a moment in the Bronze Age, midway between Neolithic times, and our own period; a moment when there actually was very little knowledge in the world—technologically speaking. Why then, one wonders?"

"Yes, of course," I murmured vaguely. I didn't see what he was getting at.

"On the other hand," he went on almost as though he were talking to himself, "if the myth of Eden and the Tree were actually a far-off memory of distant and more knowledgeable times . . ."

But I shook my head. After all, I know something about anthropology, myself. "They would have to be very distant indeed," I said. "We've dug our way through millions of years, and found only the bones of reptiles. And *they* were there for millions of years. There was no room for man in that world."

"Ah," he said. "But the world was already old then. More than three billion years old. Perhaps four. There could have been other ice ages."

He turned from the window, and fixed me with a strangely troubled gaze. "Let's take it from the beginning," he said. "Suppose we put aside a billion years for earth to cool and to acquire its atmosphere. And another billion for the first organic cells to appear, to divide, to turn into complex organisms, to move from trilobite to some sort of sea-creature. And another billion for that sea-creature to turn into fish and mammal, and try the land—and perhaps the air. Meanwhile, of course, the flora have proliferated, and the insects have made an appearance, for RNA

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and DNA, the ribonucleic acids work fast. So, what have we left? Almost a billion years . . . of empty time."

"I see," I said gravely, humoring him. "You obviously think that there was something going on?"

"I do," said Maitland.

"We've never found any trace of it," I said.

"Tell me," said Maitland, "if our own world were to be wiped out by fission tomorrow, what would be left? The atomic clouds would hide the sun, and bring about another ice age; whatever had survived would be churned up and ground to a powder . . . except the fossils in the deepest rocks. In a hundred million years, what would there be left to find?"

Despite myself, I was a bit shaken; it was an unpleasant thought. "Then you think," I said, "that somewhere in the past there may have been a world like our own?"

"With too much knowledge," said Maitland.

It was some time before I saw him again. I was obliged to leave on a lecture tour, and on my return I heard that he had gone off on an archaeological expedition to the north.

It must have been a good three years later that I bumped into him at the club. He looked a lot older, and I noticed that he'd developed a sort of tic on one side of his face. We exchanged the usual greetings, and then something—I don't know what—made me ask, half jokingly, "Well, did you find that other ice age?"

"Yes," he said.

"The devil you say!"

"It was just as I thought," said Maitland.

He said no more and turned away, but a few days later he asked me to visit him in his quarters. "You're a student of languages," he said. "I have something to show you."

Although I do speak a number of modern dialects, my studies have been mostly in the roots of language. "What I have," he said, "seems to be in some kind of English."

So saying, he brought out of a drawer in his desk, a flat object which on examination proved to be a notebook encased in a sort of plastic cover. "I found this," he said, "in the middle of a block of lava, one hundred feet below the surface, on the south slope of the eastern range of the Canadian Rocky Mountains."

His voice trembled a little. "As far as I know," he said, "there has been no volcanic activity in that region since the Pleistocene."

I looked at him incredulously. "Then," I said, unbelieving, "this would have been laid down before the first ice age!"

"Before *our* first ice age," said Maitland.

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I opened the package, and extracted the notebook, which was of some material with which I was not familiar. The plastic case, also, struck me as strange; by way of experimentation, I touched a match to it, but nothing happened. It was, apparently, fireproof; as a matter of fact, later tests proved it to be proof against any heat whatever.

Inside the notebook, written in ink on heavy paper, were words in a language which, at first glance, I also took to be English. But with a difference. "I have to tell you," said Maitland, "it is not reassuring."

"But why don't you publish it, man!" I exclaimed. "A find like this. . . !"

"I want to be quite sure," said Maitland. "For I shall have every archaeologist, anthropologist, and Jesuit on my neck at once. If it's what I think it is, it blows everything sky-high."

My state of mind can be imagined; I was as excited as Maitland and set myself to study the notebook. It was, as he had said, written in English, both familiar and unfamiliar. Many words appeared to have ancient Celtic roots, while others seemed vaguely Semitic. But the strangest thing about it was the suggestion that whoever had written it had experienced a dislocation of some sort, a sudden "flap" of time (as he said) from one age to another. I was unable to offer any explanation of this (and am still unable to do so).

"He seems to have been a man not unlike ourselves," I said to Maitland, "but in a slightly different history. I should like to make a translation of it, if you do not mind."

"Please do," said Maitland. I thought then that he was in ill health, and did my best to hurry.

But I was too late; Maitland died a few days later of a heart attack. With him went whatever proof he had of the notebook having been found actually imbedded in a block of pre-Mesozoic lava.

I append the translation herewith. The last thing Maitland said to me was: "No one will believe it." I offer it as fiction, since I, too, am of the opinion that no one will believe it.

As Maitland said, it is not reassuring.

I call it "Tyrannosaurus Rex."

TYRANNOSAURUS REX

There was simply a moment that was like the flap of a camera's eye: a lightning-fast *click,* unheard, but heart-stopping, and then everything was the same as before. It was like a crack in the day, between one minute and another: a curious moment, nothing you could explain or even find words for. Just a flap, like a camera, or like a page turning, except that it was still the same page; nothing had changed. I was standing on the lawn in front

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of my house, on a bright spring day, the sky blue and clear and wind-washed overhead, and the leaves stirring. It seemed a little warmer than I had thought, and I noticed that my neighbor, Connover, who had been mowing the grass of his lawn, had taken off his jacket. "It's really quite a lovely day," I said.

He came over to the hedge, and took out his handkerchief to mop his face. "I didn't see you," he said. "How are you, Alfred?"

"Fine," I said. I must admit, it struck me as a little odd, his asking me how I was, since I'd seen him only the day before, but I didn't think much about it.

"That's good," he said. "I heard you had a cold."

"Why no," I said. "I did have a cold last week, but I'm all over it."

"Well, that's it, then," he said. He must have lost track of time, I thought. But that wasn't so strange when you come right down to it; I do it myself sometimes, everybody does. The days go by before you know it. The years too, I guess.

A jet went over high above us, ahead of its own sound, and we both looked up. "You know," he said, "sometimes at night they drown out the television. Can you imagine what it will be like when the sky is full of them? And those new, two-thousand-miles-an-hour jobs . . ."

It was true, they were a nuisance; they'd block out half a symphony on the hi-fi, but I was used to them, and anyway, what could you do? "Did you see the satellite go over last night?" I asked.

But Connover hadn't seen it. Not that there was anything unusual about the satellites, but watching them swimming by overhead (they seem to move so slowly) always gives me a strange feeling. Those little star-like lights floating along far up there in the black sky bring home to me the mystery in which we live . . . the sense of endless time and endless space just out beyond earth's little crust of light and air and *now*.

"Do you think we'll ever get to Mars?" I asked, and Connover shrugged his shoulders. "I don't think much about things like that." he said. "They don't help pay the bills."

He was right, of course. As a matter of fact, I found it very hard to think ahead toward a future of some kind for man; I couldn't imagine what it would be like. The past was mysterious enough, what with the new discoveries in archaeology . . . but the future? "How's your wife?" I asked.

"Fine," he said, putting away his handkerchief. She's gone to a PTA meeting."

I thought: of course, I knew that; so had mine. After all, schools were the real problem, not jets. "Children grow up so fast nowadays," I said.

Leaning on his lawnmower, he

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took out his tobacco pouch and started to fill his pipe. "You can say that again," he said. "By the time they're fourteen, they figure they're adults, and they want everything. You tell them no and they pay no attention to you."

He sighed, and touched a match to the tobacco. "There's no authority any more," he said. "I mean, nobody listens."

"I know," I said. "It's as though there wasn't anything to listen to."

We both smiled at that. But I had a feeling that I'd said it all before somewhere, and that it wasn't funny at all, but sad, and somehow frightening.

"Yes," said Connover, "they want everything while they can get it. The way they say it, it's now or maybe never. With the bomb, that is, and not knowing will anything be left tomorrow.

"Not that I worry, myself," he added. "I don't believe we'll ever use it."

"Of course not," I agreed. "But *They* might. Now that They have it. There's almost a billion of them; life is pretty cheap over there, the way They look at it."

"Well," he said, "They've forgot to figure something. It isn't the blowing-up of everything; it's the fallout, the radiation; it would wipe Them out just as easy as it would us. It would be maybe a million years before there'd be any kind of life again on this planet . . . if there ever *was* life again, which is doubtful. That's what gets me: not so much dying myself, on account of, hell, everybody's got to die sooner or later—but seeing earth as a kind of burnt-out cinder drifting through space . . ."

"Something would survive," I said hopefully. "Some pattern of ribonucleic acids . . ."

He nodded. "I suppose so," he said. "Under the sea, maybe; trilobites, like there used to be. But you have to think of the mutations; whatever survived would be changed. I mean, you take something like a beetle. You might have a monster."

"You might," I said. "Like in the horror films."

It seemed like a silly sort of conversation, and I turned to go back into the house. But then I stopped, and looked back across the lawn. "What's the matter?" asked Connover.

"It's nothing," I said. "Only that I never seem to have noticed that tree-fern before."

He looked at me curiously. "You didn't?" he said. "It's always been there; it's just an ordinary eoptolis."

"Yes," I said, "of course." But why did I have a feeling that I'd never seen an eoptolis before?

I went inside and poured myself a Scotch, and I thought about the flap, and wondered if maybe it was me, and whether I ought to worry about it. But my pulse was all right, and the drink tasted fine, and I felt

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fine. I could hear a jet flying by overhead, and my wife was at the PTA along with Connover's wife. Everything was in order.

I turned the radio on for the afternoon news, and that was in order too. The winter had been cold; crime had more than doubled; the usual number of young hoodlums were stealing cars and beating people on the streets, for which they were being given the usual probation. The usual number of murderers were being let out on parole; anti-segregationists were being jailed, banks were being robbed; the stock market was soaring. New apartment houses were going up in every part of the city, children were dancing, purveyors of drugs and pornography were getting rich, and men were planning to land on the moon. My daughter, aged twelve was "going-steady" . . . What was there to worry about?

Perhaps the bomb would be dropped some day, and we'd all be wiped out, or changed into "something wild and strange," like the poet said. But it seemed unlikely. Even "They" would hesitate to fill the earth with monster beetles!

I remembered that I had a date to meet my wife at the Zoo. We often met there in the late afternoon, to feed the animals—in particular those cunning little creatures called dinosaurs. There was one who never failed to come to the front of his cage to greet us; he was a clown, he had two tiny forelegs with which he would beg for peanuts or whatever we would give him, powerful haunches (that is, for his size which must have been all of a foot and a half) and a long snout with wicked little possum-like teeth.

For some reason we called him Tyrannosaurus Rex. I don't know why; I guess it amused us. We often laughed and joked about what the world would be like if this little fellow were to increase in size.

Coming soon . . .

. . . a wild Ben Jolson adventure by **Ron Goulart** (in which Jolson tangles with a pacifist scare on the cemetery planet of Esperanza); a Vermilion Sands story by **J. G. Ballard**; two never before published stories by **Richard McKenna**; plus new stories by **Avram Davidson, Samuel R. Delany, R. Bretnor** and many others.

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David Madden, formerly an actor, radio announcer and assistant editor of The Kenyon Review, *is the author of several books and plays, and numerous short stories and reviews. He is presently associate editor of* Film Heritage *and teaches drama and English at Ohio University. His first story for us concerns Master's candidate Philip Hockaday Fonville and his thesis—in the words of Mr. Fonville, "an entirely new contribution . . ."*

THE MASTER'S THESIS

by David Madden

A SOUND LIKE THE CRACKLING of a fire intruded upon Professor Swinnard's nap. He opened his eyes on a black sweater in full sunlight across the room. Faded and fuzzy, it had a white band just under the V of the neck where red reindeer lifted their feet.

Swinnard became aware that his finger still pointed at the place in *Current History* where he had begun an article by a former student, that his foot, turned inward in the unbuckled galosh, prickled and throbbed, and that a student, without knocking, had entered his office, had taken a chair, and was now peeling the wrapper from a Baby Ruth.

The professor started to speak but closed his mouth when he felt saliva slip down his chin, tremble at his dimple. He swallowed and wiped and settled his glasses in place. "My—my office hours—"

"Yes, sir."

"—are posted on the—"

"Yes."

"Are you in my freshman survey course? Veteran students generally know better than to—"

"Sir," said the young man, uncrossing his long legs, tapping one of the reindeer with the exposed nub of his candy bar, "I am your advisee. I am a Master's candidate."

"What courses have you had with me?" Swinnard relaxed, depending upon the effect of his rep-

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utation to bring balance to the situation.

"None, sir. I earned my B.A. elsewhere."

The professor blinked. "You expect to *earn* your Master's here?" He closed *Current History* with a slow flourish.

"I can't miss, sir."

Professor Swinnard swiveled in his chair. "I beg your pardon?"

"Can't miss, sir," said the boy, rearranging the wrapper out of which the brown nub of his Baby Ruth protruded.

"Young man, you have already missed a great deal. You will never again invade the privacy of my office. You will knock, you will be granted permission to enter, you *may* be offered a chair. And you will not, if you please, rattle candy wrappers in my face."

The young man shoved the partially nude candy bar up under his sweater, agitating the reindeer. His eyes pale, his mouth soft, his ears flushed from the late September chill, he looked suddenly under sixteen. "My supper, sir."

"Suppose we—start all over again. Or rather, simply start."

"I'll buy that."

"Your name?"

"Philip Hockaday Fonville, so help me God."

"I—I am Professor Swinnard, as you know. Let's see. Ah, yes, here you are—on the list, I see—opposite my name."

"Oh, there's no mistake, sir."

"Did you . . . did you ask for me?"

"Frankly, sir, I had another preference. No reflection—since I hardly know you. But I *had*—"

"What? Whom did you want?"

"Professor Korpmann."

"But he died last summer."

"So, I said, if that's the way the ball bounces, anyone will do."

"I—see. Well, I haven't time this afternoon to engage in a long conference with you. Tomorrow perhaps we can outline your course of study, and once I have had an opportunity to review your work—somewhere near Christmas, I imagine—we may sit down and go over a list of possible thesis projects. I have a good list which has produced a number of—"

"We won't have to sweat that one, sir."

"Mr. Fonville, let me suggest that you—"

"No question about the thesis. Square that away right now. Put your mind at ease, sir."

"I'm sure none of us is without his pet topic, Mr. Fonville. We won't be bothered by that. Countless theses have been written. One must review the possibilities—"

"No, sir, I'm certain, this is virgin territory. Never been touched, sir. Mine will be an entirely new contribution."

"Your presumptuousness is colossal, Fonville. Perhaps we had best meet tomorrow, when you have had time to—"

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"Time? For what, sir? I've chosen the subject of my thesis."

"In my forty years of teaching, I've often stumbled on your sort. Burning with a project that will transform—"

"I realize it will take hard work, sir, and I shall require your assistance at unusual hours of the day and night owing to its nature."

Swinnard was about to say, "My office hours are posted," when the telephone rang. His sister. Calling from her home forty miles away. Wanting to know whether he knew it was raining. He told her he did. Could see it on the window. Good. Just don't forget the galoshes. No. Then goodbye.

Fonville was almost to the door, but turned and pulled out his sweater, dropping the Baby Ruth into his open hand. "Only wanted to let you know I'm around, sir." He nodded, did an obsequious shuffle just beyond the cracked threshold, wandered away.

"Listen, young man, you—" He had to get it settled. But just as he leaned out the door, the red that streaked across the boy's sweater blinked around the corner. Swinnard put his hand over his heart and remembered a hot summer twilight when the ferris wheel jammed and his father kept rocking their chair. Later, as he was approaching the faculty parking lot, Swinnard discovered that he had forgotten to pull on the other galosh.

That night Swinnard got out his notes, yellowed and buffed, to review his first lecture. Somewhere in the late Bronze Age, he fell asleep. The telephone startled him awake. When he rose and took the phone in his hand, his notes slid to the carpet.

"You get the news about old Sanford?"

"Who?"

"Sanford, the music teacher. They found him on the bathroom floor."

"Who did?"

"I didn't get you out of bed, did I?" Now Swinnard recognized the voice of the department chairman. "Sanford—they found him dead—"

"No, I hadn't heard. Look—do you know a boy named—?" Swinnard began to ask, but the department chairman had hung up.

The next morning, the rain had turned to thick fog. In the dark basement hallway, Professor Swinnard almost stepped on the boy. Fonville looked up in the dim light and got to his feet. Close up, his eyes were red.

Swinnard would let the boy begin and at the first opportunity squash him. Not that Mr. Fonville had any kind of upper hand.

"Have a good night's rest, sir?"

"Now look here, young man, once and for all, you will kindly observe a little decorum."

"Sir, I was only inquiring into

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the state of your health." It sounded to Swinnard like parody.

"Sit down," he ordered. Then he realized he was late for a class and that he had quite forgotten his nine o'clock office hour.

But the boy sat down before he could explain. Swinnard noticed that the boy carried no books. He wore the same sweater, the reindeer crossing the snow to the gentle pace of his breathing.

Swinnard took his notes from the briefcase and tapped them sharply on the desk until they were precisely even. He sought a phrase that would work, but the insultingly eager look on Fonville's face persuaded Swinnard to deal with the boy more roughly. He simply went to class, leaving Fonville to sit in the shadows.

When Swinnard returned from his class to his office, Fonville was there, standing in front of Swinnard's desk with the telephone to his ear. He held it out to Swinnard. Furious, Swinnard jerked it out of the boy's hand and sat down.

It was the president, asking how he was. Fine. How was the president? The president was fine, never felt better, got in some golf before the rain set in last evening. Fine, sir. He had heard some fine things about Professor Swinnard from one of his students there in the office. Said everything was working out just fine. Well, fine. They would see each other soon, of course, and have a nice chat. It had been too long since the last one. In the men's john at a community concert, Swinnard remembered as he hung up.

It felt good to Swinnard to talk to the president without having to play up to him, or feeling as if one had, knowing that one never really had. With one more year, one didn't have to. . . . There the boy sat, his slender legs crossed, his palms cupped under his elbows, his chest hairy with the sweater where those reindeer lifted their feet.

"He's a nice guy," said the boy.

Swinnard did not comment. After all, the boy had said something nice about him to the president.

"Now, young man," he said, turning *Current History* right side up and looking for something, anything that he might have misplaced, "suppose we get this whole affair in perspective."

"I'm having it typed up now, sir."

"What's that?"

"The first chapter."

"Come now," Swinnard said, grinning, trying to find some way to attack the problem. "We must be serious."

"Sir, how much seriouser can I get? Up all night gnawing on candy bars to keep up my strength while I struggle with this thing."

"You are actually in the writing phase of—"

"Oh, it's going to be ready before the deadline—way before. Typed

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up in three neat copies, bound and everything. Neat and crisp."

"I refuse to sit here," said Swinnard, rising, "and listen to you rant in this manner."

"But, sir, as my advisor. . . ."

Swinnard walked over to the boy and stood above him. "You will please leave and not pester me again."

The boy looked up at Swinnard and pointed toward the desk. "I'm *on* the list, sir."

"Confound the list!"

"Think," said the boy, standing now, "of the thousands who died building the pyramids, sir."

"To what end?"

"The victims of the plague."

"What has the plague to do with—?"

"Men die."

"Assuredly, but I fail to see what this has to do with our graduate program in history." Swinnard moved away from an odor that seemed to emanate from the boy.

"I know how to work in all the footnotes you want, sir. Charts. Tables. Maps. Diagrams." He ticked them off on his long skinny fingers. "Graphs. Indices. Appendices. You name it. I'll whip it up for you in a shake, sir."

"Do you think that makes a thesis?"

"No."

"Then get out."

"I'll see you around, sir. I'll pick up those first pages and shoot them over to you personally."

"You will please not to bother me."

"I can see you're upset just now, sir."

"Not in the least."

"You need to get off your feet, sir."

"I need to be left alone."

"Of course, you're right, sir."

The boy left. In the sudden emptiness of the room, Swinnard realized that he had forgotten something. Yes. The reason for the president's call. Surely not just to ask how he was. Worrying now, imagining, ready to apologize for having cut him off, he rang the president's office.

"No, no, Swinnard, *I* didn't call *you*. The young man in your office called *me*."

At noon he crossed the campus to the bookstore. He had promised his sister he would bring *Flower Arranging Made Easy* when he came for dinner.

As he was starting up the steps to the bookstore, Swinnard saw Philip Hockaday Fonville running toward him, waving some white sheets, but not calling to him, the faded black sweater with the white band and the red reindeer circling his chest and back as though he were a Greek vase. Swinnard escaped, trying not to run.

The next morning, Professor Swinnard came out of the classroom at the end of the hall, and

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there was the boy, sitting on the sooty concrete floor, his back against the blighted chestnut office door, his head resting on his crossed arms. Swinnard wedged himself between two students, fell in behind three others, and left the building by another entrance.

Swinnard strolled into the administration building, glanced at some out-dated bulletins, then ambled back to his office. A student leaned against the wall. Fonville was gone.

"Did he say he would be back tomorrow?"

"Who?"

"The boy who was here," Swinnard said.

"Nobody was here."

Then he saw the note.

Dear Prof:

Waited two hours, through your office hours. I hope you realize that I am not an impatient sort, but after all, I *am* a graduate student, am I not, and should be granted periodic interviews???

Please inform me by student mail as to when you will be available.

Yours truly,

Philip Hockaday Fonville

The three-by-five note card was fastened firmly to his door with a white thumbtack, streaked with red, as though the boy had stuck himself.

Swinnard rose before dawn and went down to the kitchen and leaned against the sink. He drank a glass of water. The moon was a silver bow. There was one glint of light on the clothesline on the lawn. He imagined the bow he once made with a limb from a hedgeberry tree. It had been years since anything had disturbed him. As a child he would stand in his back yard and look up at the sun, upside-down through his legs. He remembered the odd thrill the view gave him. He realized that what he wanted most of all was peace, so, leaning against the front of the refrigerator, he wrote a note that put him face to face with the young man.

To Philip Hockaday Fonville:

Apparently you have been unsuccessful in trying to locate me for an interview. With school only a few days underway, I can't imagine what we would talk about, except a *possible* subject for your master's thesis. Should this be the case, please be advised that my office hours for today are 2 to 5.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Swinnard

Then he slept the sleep of the unburdened.

The Master's candidate hadn't come at two. At four, Swinnard admitted two other students to his office. They would take up the time. He closed the door and sat down with the first student. Some-

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thing about never being able to remember dates, and Swinnard gave up listening. He thought of Fonville, and then he tried to remember something out of his own childhood. It was when Swinnard heard himself asking the student at his side where he was from that he also heard a light knock on the door.

"Did someone knock?" he asked the student.

"I believe someone did, sir."

Swinnard had half-risen to leave the desk when the door creaked open and Fonville stuck in his head and saluted with a slim white hand that protruded from the sleeve of his fuzzy black sweater.

"Don't get up, sir. Stay right where you are. Won't take but a minute." Shoving the door open, he swooped, making no noise with either door or feet, only a rattle with the papers in his hand. Swinnard remained half-squatting at his desk. "There we are, sir. Neat as the veritable pin. Chapter One. I'll just place it here and bother you not a second longer." Pivoting, he returned to the door, where he turned, suddenly, and raised his arm, like a child asking permission to speak: "Oh, yes. A report on that tomorrow morning at ten would be of immense help to me, sir. In the midst of things at the moment." He was gone before Swinnard could speak.

The professor dismissed the other student and glanced at the stack of white sheets. The cover page was blank. He locked up for the day. Later, sitting in his car, Swinnard couldn't move. He went back, got the pages, and rammed them into his briefcase.

It was as though he were afraid to let it into his house. At a Chinese restaurant where he occasionally celebrated a birthday, he sat down with orange tea and decided that he would read the piece and find in it such factual inaccuracy and inadequate documentation as could be used against the boy.

But he put it off until he had eaten, and then he opened the evening paper.

That night he realized he had forgotten to read the chapter, that he had, in fact, left it on the table in the Chinese restaurant. He telephoned, and the dishwasher answered. Yes, he had. It was in the garbage, and the garbage was on the truck. Yes, he could read a little English. One word on the second page, "Death," followed by a name in three parts. Swinnard thanked him and tried to sleep.

The telephone woke him. The blinds were still dark.

"Yes?"

"Sir?"

"Who is this?"

"Just called to see how you liked it so far. I'm going full speed on the second chapter."

Swinnard hung up. He turned

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on the bedside lamp. His wife used to say, "How can you see to talk in the dark?" He looked at the twin bed where she had died, and all of her unborn children with her.

He went downstairs and made some coffee. He opened the back door and stood behind the screen in the chill air, watching the rain clouds go over the moon.

At ten o'clock that morning he left his basement classroom with the students. Without even glancing down the hall at his office door, he walked briskly out the same way he had used to evade the boy before. But he heard someone call his name. He quickened his stride, his heart pounding hard in the soles of his feet. The touch of fingers turned him. A short, stocky boy, wearing a letter-man's sweater and carrying a load of books under his arm, handed him a note and galloped off.

Dear Professor Swinnard:

Regrettably, I am unable to make our appointment at nine (or was it ten?). Like everyone else, I have my problems. The dentist insists on extracting three of my teeth.

Yours cordially,

Philip Hockaday Fonville

Swinnard crumpled the note and dropped it where he stood. His hand empty, he put it to his head.

Professor Swinnard was rolling up the maps after Survey of European History when Fonville walked in, grinning to show where a front tooth was missing. Swinnard, up on his tiptoes to reach the map case, thought he was going to faint. He sat down at the desk.

"Well, sir, everything is now fine. Couldn't be better. Teeth out, pain gone, and here I am for that consultation."

Swinnard began to talk. When he realized he was stuttering, he stood up and looked the boy in the face. "Mr. Fonville," he said, "I have lost your first chapter," and then he turned away to put his notes in his briefcase.

"Sir, this is unforgivable."

"I'm sorry. It couldn't be helped. Now if you'll excuse me."

"But, sir. Think. Think. Where? Where?"

"I—don't recall."

"This means I'll have to write it over, sir. Interrupt my work at its present juncture."

"Don't you see how utterly impossible this whole thing is?" Swinnard blurted out.

"Sir, if you don't mind my saying so, this is a hell of an attitude to take. I come to you with a unique thesis. A little variety. What's impossible about it?"

"Don't raise your voice, young man!"

"Raise my voice? I'm entitled to raise my voice. You've just *lost*, and for no good reason, a thing into which I've put, you might say, sweat, sir! Blood, sir!"

"You will stop haranguing me in

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this melodramatic way!" Swinnard felt heavy. He backed toward the door. Inside his coat, he was hot. His skull felt numb. The boy kept talking, turning around and around talking, following him, and the reindeer reared up on the white band and the black quivered in the light coming through the tall windows. He reached out to touch the boy, to get him to stand still.

And Fonville was saying, "I am very quiet, sir. I am very quiet now, sir. It's all right. I've forgiven you." Swinnard was in the desk chair, his coat flung back, his shirt undone, his tie dangling between his legs.

Days passed with no sign of the boy. In Fonville's absence, Professor Swinnard tried to relax. Dozing off in his office, he would jerk up, anticipating the sound of a candy bar wrapper. He asked around. None of the students knew the boy. Yes, they'd noticed the sweater. He checked the boy's schedule in the registrar's office, but he was down for thesis credit only. That was a technicality Swinnard could use. One had to take certain required courses before even beginning to discuss a thesis.

But as the weeks passed Swinnard forgot that. The boy wasn't registered in the dormitories. The address in the files turned out to be on the other side of town, in a neighborhood with many misleading house numbers. He didn't want to see where Fonville lived. Somehow, the idea of the boy's room frightened him.

Maybe Fonville was ill. The hospitals said no. Or dead. The morgue had never heard of Philip Hockaday Fonville. At night, he would remember fainting in that classroom. He worried about his heart.

One night, he came home to find a note the cleaning woman had propped against the bread box. Philip Hockaday Fonville had called and left a number.

Swinnard couldn't eat supper. When he had started upstairs, he remembered the note and decided to make the call from his bed. Instead, he lay down in the dark and tried to sleep. Three hours later, he pulled himself up, went downstairs, and walked out onto the lawn. He looked up at the moon and wondered how the earth, that seemed to curve there in the yard, would look upside-down.

The next morning, Professor Swinnard called the university from a booth on the highway. He said he was sick. He spent the day driving in the country. Toward three o'clock, he felt guilty. He had never lied like that before. He was proud of his perfect attendance record. He would put in an appearance.

Crossing the campus, he saw the boy coming toward him, a huge bundle of papers in his skinny

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arms. Swinnard ducked behind a massive shrub and cut across the grass, glancing back. The boy was going toward the administration building.

At his office, Swinnard found a slip of paper on the floor instructing him to call the dean immediately.

The dean wanted to know what the problem was with this Fonville youngster. Swinnard's grip on the receiver relaxed. At last they were finding the boy out. But the dean went on to say that the boy had complained that he, Swinnard, was being standoffish. What about that? The president, the dean said, had met with the boy. The president wanted to see that everything was done right by the young man. The boy was right there in the dean's office, very upset, and to tell the truth, hurt. Would Swinnard see him now? Yes, Swinnard would. He hung up.

He wouldn't try to explain. No student was going to do to him what this boy had done to him for almost a month. He would play along. In the end, he would be vindicated.

He sat, waited. After a while, it occurred to him that the boy might be making him wait. Resentment gave way to sleep, as he sat there in his galoshes, the gray light falling through the dusty windows. A light knock brought Swinnard awake with a start. The boy edged into the room quietly.

"I hate to disturb you, sir," he said, very softly, "but as this seemed a good opportunity to have our long-awaited buzz session, I thought I'd come ahead."

"I have less than an hour. I must. . . ."

"Oh, I understand, sir. Of course."

Fonville pulled a chair close to the desk until their knees almost touched. Swinnard noticed what tremendous feet the boy had. His galoshes made his own feet look large, but they were small alongside the boy's. Fonville settled himself, but first, Swinnard wanted to know what that odor was.

"Smell, sir?" The boy got up and looked all around the room, sniffing in each corner, sticking his head out the door into the hall, and peeping over the window sill into the yard under the bushes. When the boy sat down, Swinnard realized that the odor was stronger.

They faced each other, ready again for the conference. But the boy didn't speak. He only looked at Swinnard. Then he reached under his sweater and pulled out a Butterfinger and started to split the wrapper with the long, sharp nail of his little finger. "May I, sir? My supper."

Swinnard waited, but still the boy didn't speak. Then he reached under his sweater again and brought out what looked like a transistor radio. The little mechanism glinted like silver. The boy's

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thumb flicked a tiny switch and Swinnard heard a faint whirr.

"What in the devil is that vicious little object?"

"And I thought we knew each other well enough so you wouldn't shy from it. The quality on the other tapes has been rather substandard. My sweater seems to muffle your voice."

"Other tapes?" asked Swinnard, unable to look away from the gadget.

"I've recorded all our exchanges, sir. I believe in getting the full value of—"

"Please go on, young man. What is it you want to talk about?"

"My thesis, of course."

"Then go ahead."

"*Me,* sir?" Fonville pointed at one of the reindeer with the Butterfinger. "Aren't *you,*" he said, pointing the Butterfinger at Swinnard but then lowering it, "going to ask *me* questions?"

"I have no questions."

"Aren't you supposed to quiz me, to suggest, to comment, to analyze and evaluate?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you've been writing."

"Well, now, sir, is that *my* fault?"

"I've heard quite enough of that, young man. I imagine you have written further on your project."

"That's it exactly, sir, sick as I was. Diarrhea. Inflammation of the gums. I'm sorry I didn't keep you informed."

"Quite all right. Turn what you have over to me. In a week or so, we'll meet again."

"You're being remarkably nice about it, sir. Thank you."

"Good, then. I'll take whatever you have."

"Oh, I don't have it with me. It's over at the Ad Building, being run off."

"Run off?"

"Yes, sir. Copies. In case of loss, fire, or something like that. If there's one thing you've taught me, sir, it's to take precautions."

"A very silly idea, Mr. Fonville. An unnecessary expenditure."

"That's okay, sir. I charged it to the department, in your name."

Later, Swinnard could not remember what he had said to the boy. No doubt the machine had recorded it.

The professor suffered that night. He could not sleep. His body trembled. He was certain he had a heart murmur. At dawn, the telephone rang.

"Sir?"

He hung up.

An hour later, it rang again. He answered, swaying, his knee braced on the bed that had been his wife's. "Yes?"

"I'll deliver it to your office, sir. You won't even have to speak to me. Goodbye, sir, thank you, sir."

Swinnard held the phone a long time before he hung up.

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The turning of the key in his office door set him to trembling. He shut the door. When he heard the light knock, he ran across the room and bolted the door. The knob turned several times. Swinnard waited, knowing that the boy's feet, large as they were, never made noise. He thought he smelled them.

He stayed in the office through his class and heard the students leave his classroom down the corridor, talking loudly, laughing, glad he had not shown up. He tried to busy himself, but the sight of his notes made him dizzy. When he opened a bottom drawer and saw nothing but dust, a few rubber bands, and a rusty paper clip, he wept.

At ten-thirty, he went to the door, listened again. The odor was gone. He slipped the latch and looked out. A piece of cardboard was thumb-tacked to the door.

Sir: I am looking for you. I must get the finished thesis to you before something happens to it. I'm in the mimeograph room in the Ad Bldg. ! ! !

Respectfully,
P.H.F.

Swinnard returned quickly to his desk and got his briefcase ready to go. His sense of hearing had become so extremely acute that he heard, very faintly, the outside door down the hall open. He rushed to the office door, slammed it, locked it, pressed his back against it. His throat was dry, his eyes burned, his legs were weak, and his heart beat heavily. A light knock. He waited for the knob to turn. A sound like a guillotine, and he looked down.

Between his feet lay a sheet of paper. He picked it up. A brief message informed him that his contribution to the United Faculty Flower Fund had not been received as pledged. Swinnard laughed, sat down at his desk, and wrote out a check. He put it in an envelope and mailed it in the campus box on the way to the parking lot.

He felt utterly calm at supper. Later, he watched television. He even watched a puppet show and smiled. Then he went to bed.

Like a large pimple, a stack of white paper lay on the bed spread.

Fighting an impulse to run, he caught himself, clenched his fists as though arming against some wild creature. The stack was tied with frayed red cord. On top was a note from the cleaning woman.

Dear Prof. Swinnard,

A nice young man delivered this stuff this morning just after you left for the office. He begged me to make you read it tonight because he's leaving town tomorrow. I told him you couldn't possibly finish so much tonight, but he said he'd call you tonight to see what you think of the first part.

Yours truly,
Mildred.

Swinnard stepped back and the

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white bulk bounced slightly where his knee had pressed against the mattress.

He removed the receiver from its cradle, turned off the light, and softly closed the door. Moving through the living room, he lifted the receiver on the downstairs telephone and let it drop into the chair he had warmed watching television. The sound of the kitchen screen opening comforted him.

Standing on the peaceful lawn under the full moon, he knew that, despite the chill in the air, this was what he wanted to do. He ducked under the clothes line. The summer sound of the screen door was still in his ears. He bent over toward the curving grass and reached to grip the backs of his legs. Strands of his thin grey hair brushed the grass. His glasses slid down over the bridge of his nose and dangled from one ear as he peered between his legs, upside-down. The earth turned black, the moon melted, making the sky one white radiance, and in the soles of his feet, Swinnard felt the distant beat of hoofs.

FLIGHT BETWEEN REALITIES

This may be I, holding glass elegance—
a flower stem crowned with a bud of cream sherry.

But I am probably forecast alloyed with recall
which listens to hear again the morning stars
affirming hope; which has seen blue suns, shrunk yellow,
twirling bright balls of new worlds
like the gay, balanced globes of a dervish.

I am Mind holding as ever a template on Matter;
am tears of things which seep through that crack
where a divided universe grew schizoid.
I am the resurrection remembered by death
when a system expands to its ultimate loneliness.

This: headier wine
between sips of cream sherry.

—Doris Pitkin Buck

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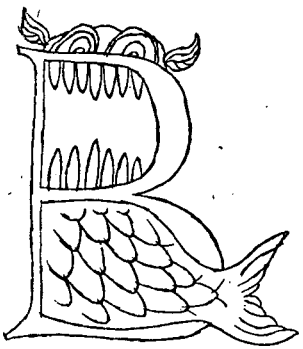
THE SEA MONSTER AND THE MAYOR OF NEW YORK CITY

by Gahan Wilson



BECAUSE OF AN ILL ADVISED ATOMIC experiment, a giant sea monster was awakened from his slumber in the stygian depths. Affronted at this interruption of his peaceful slumber, the huge creature rose to the surface of the waters, determined to avenge himself on the race which had produced his inconvenience.

He cruised the vast Atlantic, occasionally munching a passing ship, and pondered on the best means of expressing his extreme displeasure. When he observed that the bulk of the sea traffic tended to head in a certain direction, he went that way and thus discovered New York. He decided he would eat it up, both because the unwonted exercise he had indulged in had given him an enormous appetite and because he judged it an excellent way to chastise the pygmy beings who had so rudely stirred him from his repose.

"If you attempt to swallow up this city," warned the Mayor of New York, speaking to the sea monster by means of a gigantic public address system mounted on a harbor tug, "You will live to regret it deeply!"

Ignoring this with a snort of contempt, the immense beast swam past the Mayor's tug and proceeded to eat Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island at one gulp.

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Unhappily for him, along with the above mentioned real estate, the monster also consumed, among other unpleasant items, a dozen snarling traffic jams, hundreds of homicidal maniacs, a quantity of violent riots, and an incredible amount of polluted air. Writhing and groaning from the hideous effects produced by his horrible repast, the poor behemoth struggled out to sea.

"I spoke from experience," said the Mayor bitterly, watching the sea monster's uneven retreat.

MORAL: *Many threats are kindly meant.*

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SCIENCE

TWELVE POINT THREE SIX NINE

by Isaac Asimov

ONCE IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL, MY English teacher gave the class the assignment of reading and pondering Leigh Hunt's poem "Abou ben Adhem." Perhaps you remember it.

Abou ben Adhem awoke one night from a deep dream of peace and found an angel making a list of the names of those who loved God. Ben Adhem naturally wanted to know if he was included and was told he wasn't. Humbly, he asked to be included as one who loved his fellow men, at least.

The next night the angel reappeared "And show'd the names whom love of God had bless'd / And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest."

I knew the poem and had a pretty good notion as to the course of the class discussion planned for the next day by the teacher. There would be little homilies about how to love God meant to love mankind and vice versa. I agreed with that, but thought it would be rather dull to spend time on so self-evident a proposition. Could not some alternate meaning be wrenched out of the miserably unsubtle poem? I could find none.

The next day, our English teacher, with a kindly smile, asked, "Now, class, who will volunteer to tell me why Abou ben Adhem's name led all the rest?"

Blinding inspiration struck me. I raised my hand violently and when the teacher nodded at me, I said, with a beatific smile, "Alphabetical order, sir!"

I didn't really expect him to be grateful for this new light I was shedding on Leigh Hunt's poem, so I wasn't surprised when he pointed his thumb quietly at the door. I left (knowing the way, for I had been

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ejected for obstreperous behavior on several previous occasions) and the class discussion went on without me.

But, as I discovered afterward, Abou ben Adhem had been effectively punctured, and the teacher had gone on to discuss other matters, so I suppose I won out.

If I get weary of the lack of subtlety in "Abou ben Adhem," you can imagine how desperate I feel about those who maintain the entire Universe to be equally unsubtle.

Naturally, I get most desperate when the unsubtlety is of a sort to which I feel myself to be (in secret) deeply attracted. For instance, there are those who, having noted some simple and hackneyed relationships between numbers or between geometrical figures, promptly suppose that the structure of the Universe is designed merely to show off those relationships. (And, to my self-disgust, I always find this sort of thing interesting.)

Mystics have been guilty of such simple-mindedness, I am sure, in every society complicated enough to have invented arithmetic, but the best early examples known today are to be found among the Greeks.

For instance, Pythagoras of Samos, about 500 B.C., plucked taut strings and listened to the notes that were produced. He observed that pleasant-sounding combinations of notes were heard when strings were of lengths that bore a simple arithmetical ratio to one another: 1 to 2, or 3 to 4 to 5. It was that, perhaps, which led him and his followers to believe that the physical world was governed by numerical relationships, and simple numerical relationships at that.

It is true, of course, that numerical relationships are of importance in the Universe, but they are not always simple by any means. For instance, a fact of apparently fundamental importance is the ratio of the mass of the proton to the electron—which is 1836.11. Why 1836.11? No one knows.

But we can't blame the Pythagoreans for their lack of knowledge of modern physics. Let us rather consider with astonishment a pupil of Pythagoras by the name of Philolaus of Tarentum. As far as we know, he was the first man in history (about 480 B.C.) to suggest that the Earth moved through space.

Let's try to trace his reasoning. As the Greeks could see, the starry heavens revolved about the Earth. However, seven particular heavenly objects—the Sun, the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn—moved independently of the fixed stars and of each other. One might suppose, therefore, that there were eight concentric (and trans-

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parent) spheres in the heaven, revolving about the Earth. The innermost contained the Moon affixed to itself, the next Mercury, then Venus, then the Sun, then Mars, Jupiter, Saturn. The eighth and outermost contained the host of stars.

Philolaus was not content with this arrangement. He suggested that the eight spheres did not move about the Earth but about some "central fire." This central fire was invisible, but its reflection could be seen as the Sun. Furthermore, the Earth itself was also fixed in a sphere that revolved about the central fire. And, in addition, there was still *another* body, the "counter-Earth," which we never saw because it stayed always on the side of the Sun opposite ourselves, and that counter-Earth was in still another sphere that revolved about the central fire.

So a total of ten revolving spheres are allowed for in Philolaus' system: the eight ordinary ones, plus a ninth for the Earth, and a tenth for the counter-Earth.

How did Philolaus arrive at that? To be sure, two centuries after his time, Aristarchus of Samos also suggested the Earth moved, but he insisted it moved around the Sun. This was considered absurd at the time, but at least Aristarchus made use of bodies perceptible to the senses. Why did Philolaus invent an invisible central fire and an invisible counter-Earth?

The probable answer rests with the *number* of spheres. If the Earth revolved about the Sun, you would have to add a sphere for the Earth, but subtract one for the now stationary Sun, and the total would still be eight. If you kept both Earth and Sun moving about an invisible center and added a counter-Earth, you would have ten.

And why ten spheres? Well, the Pythagoreans thought ten was a particularly satisfactory number because $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10$, something which lent itself to involved reasoning that ended in ten as a perfect number. If, then, we argue that the Universe has to be perfect and that its notion of perfection had to agree with that of the Pythagoreans, and if it were further granted that the Universe had no reason for existence but to exhibit that perfection—then the total number of spheres has to be ten (even though two of the spheres have to be kept secret for some arcane reason).

Unfortunately, the trouble with all such irrefutable arguments based on the mystical properties of numbers is that no two people can ever quite bring themselves to believe in the same mystique. The Pythagorean notion went out of the window and astronomers contented themselves with eight spheres. Indeed, since the starry sphere was dismissed as mere background, the magic number became seven.

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Arguments concerning the structure of the Universe, based on simple arithmetic (and worse) did not die out with the Greeks, by any means.

In 1610, Galileo, using the telescope, discovered that Jupiter had four lesser bodies circling it. This meant that there were eleven bodies (excluding the fixed stars themselves) that circled the Earth according to the old Greek system—or eleven bodies circling the Sun, according to the new-fangled Copernican system.

Great was the opposition to this new discovery, and the arguments against it by one adversary will live forever in the history of human folly.

It was not necessary, explained the learned scholar, to look through the telescope. The new bodies could not be there, since there could only be seven bodies circling the Earth (or Sun) and no more. If the additional bodies were seen, it had to be because of a defect in the telescope, because the new bodies *could not* be there.

And how could one be sure they could not be there? Easy! As there were seven openings in the head—two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and a mouth—so there must be seven planetary bodies in the heavens.

Thus, it seemed, it was necessary to so order the entire Universe as to make some sort of permanent record in the heavens corresponding to the number of openings in the human head. It was as though God needed crib-notes that would enable him to keep the figure in mind, so that he wouldn't create Man with the wrong number of openings. (I'm sorry if that sounds blasphemous, for I don't mean it to be so. The blasphemy is on the part of those men, past and present, who try to make it appear that God is a kindergarten infant, playing with number blocks.)

Such folly dies hard. In fact, it never dies.

Astronomers, having accepted the Copernican notion of bodies circling the Sun rather than the Earth, now recognized two classes of bodies in the Solar system.

There were bodies that revolved directly about the Sun; these were the planets and in 1655, six were recognized: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Secondly, there were bodies that revolved not about the Sun directly, but about one of the planets. These were the satellites, and there were five of them recognized at the time: our own Moon and the four satellites of Jupiter, which Galileo had discovered (Io, Europa, Ganymede, and Callisto).

But in 1655, the Dutch astronomer, Christian Huygens, discovered a satellite of Saturn which he named Titan. That meant the Solar system

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consisted of six planets and six satellites. Huygens was a first-class scientist and a great figure in the history of astronomy and physics, but he wasn't proof against the symmetry of six and six. He announced that the total was complete. No more bodies remained to be found.

Alas, in 1671, the Italian-French astronomer, Giovanni D. Cassini, discovered another satellite of Saturn and spoiled the symmetry. Huygens lived to see it, too. Indeed, he lived to see Cassini discover three more satellites of Saturn.

Then we have Johann Kepler, who was not content with merely working out the number of heavenly bodies on the basis of simple arithmetic. He went a step further and tried to work out the relationships among the distances of those bodies from the Sun by interconnection with simple geometry.

There are five and only five regular solids (solids with all faces equal and all angles equal—as is true, for instance, of the cube, the most familiar of the five.)

Why not reason as follows, then? The regular solids are perfect, and so is the Universe. There are just five regular solids and, since there are six planets, there are just five interplanetary gaps.

Kepler therefore attempted to nest the five regular solids in such a way that the six planets moved along the various boundaries in the proper relationship of distances. Kepler spent a lot of time trying to adjust his solids and failed. (The acid test, that makes Kepler a great deal more than a crackpot, is that, having failed, he promptly dropped the notion.)

During the last week of 1966, however, I discovered something about Kepler I had not known before.

I was attending a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and was listening to papers on the history of astronomy. One particularly interesting paper included the statement that Kepler had felt that there ought to be just 360 days in a year. The Earth was rotating faster than it should have been, which was what made the number of days in the year 365¼. (If the day were 24 hours and 21 minutes long, there would be just 360 days in the year.)

This too-fast rotation of the Earth, in Kepler's view, somehow carried over to the Moon, forcing it to revolve a bit too quickly about the Earth. Obviously, the Moon should be revolving about the Earth in just 1/12 of a year; that is, in about 30 2/5 days. Instead, it revolved in only about 29 1/2 days.

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If the Earth revolved about the Sun in 360 days of 24 1/3 hours apiece (naturally, the hour and its subdivisions would be slightly lengthened to make just 24 hours to the slightly longer day), how convenient that would be. After all, 360 is such a pleasant number, being exactly divisible by 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 12, 15, 18, 20, 24, 30, 36, 40, 45, 60, 72, 90, 120, and 180. No other number approximating its size is evenly divisible in so many different ways.

And if each lunar month were equal to 30 days of a little over 24 hours each, there would be exactly 12 lunar months in a year. The number 12 is evenly divisible by 2, 3, 4, and 6; and 30 by 2, 3, 5, 6, 10, and 15.

Nor is it just a matter of tricks of numbers. With 30 days to the lunar month and 12 lunar months to the year, a beautifully simple calendar could be devised.

Instead, what do we have? About 29 1/2 days to a lunar month, about 365 1/4 days to a year, and about 12 3/8 lunar months to the year. And the result of this farrago of fractions? Nearly five thousand years of fiddling with calendars that has ended with one that is *still* inconvenient.

My thoughts might have ended there, but the lecturer at the AAAS meeting gave the number of lunar months in the year in decimal form rather than fractions. He said, "Instead of 12 lunar months to a year, there are 12.369." *

My eyebrows raised in astonishment at once. Indeed? Are there really 12.369 lunar months in a year? My mind began fitting notions together and at the conclusion of the lecture I raised my hand to ask a question. I wanted to know if Kepler had tried to draw a certain simple deduction from that figure. No, said the lecturer, it sounds like something Kepler might have done, but he didn't.

Excellent! Excellent! That left me free to indulge in a little mysticism of my own. After all, every one knows I am in love with figures, and I could easily design the Universe in order to show off first-grade arithmetic. What's more, I happen to be interested in the Bible, so why not show that the design of the Universe is connected with certain elementary statistics involving the Bible?

(I am not without precedent here. Isaac Newton was an indefatigable Biblical student who produced no Biblical interpretations worthy of note; and the Scottish mathematician, John Napier, who first worked

* *Actually, this is wrong, I think. According to the best figures I can find, the number of lunar months in a year is closer to 12.368. It is 12.36827, to be exact. But let's not spoil my article.*

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out logarithms, also worked out a completely worthless system for interpreting the Book of Revelation.)

Let me, therefore, go along with Kepler. Let us suppose that the whole purpose of the rate of Earth's rotation about its axis, the Moon's revolution about the Earth, and the revolution of the Earth/Moon system about the Sun, is to present mankind with pretty numbers and a symmetrical calendar.

What, then, went wrong? Surely God knew what he was doing and would not make a careless mistake. If the year were more than 360 days long there would have to be a reason for it, an exact reason. The error would be no error but would be something designed to instruct mankind in the simple-minded manner that mystics seem to like to consider characteristic of God.

There are 365 1/4 days in a year, so that the excess over 360 (the "right" number) is 5 1/4 or, in decimal form, 5.25. You must admit that 5.25 is an interesting number, since 25 is the square of 5.

Let's reason like a mystic now. Can 5.25 be a coincidence? Of course not. It must have meaning, and that meaning must be in the Bible. (After all, God is the center about which the Bible revolves, as the Sun is the center about which the Earth revolves. What more natural than to find in the revolving Bible the reasons for the details of the revolving Earth.)

The Old Testament, according to tradition, is divided into three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. All are holy and inspired, but the Law is the most sacred portion, and it is made up of the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Why, then, are there five days beyond the "proper" 360? Surely in order to mark the five books of the Law in the very motions of the Earth. And why the extra quarter-day beyond the five? Why, to make the excess not merely 5 but 5.25. By squaring the 5 and emphasizing it, the Law is demonstrated to be not only holy, but particularly holy.

Of course, there is a catch. The length of the year is not really precisely 365.25 days. It is a bit short of that, and is 365.2422 days long. (To be even more precise it is 365.242197 days long, but 365.2422 is close enough, surely.)

Does that mean that the whole scheme falls to the ground? If you think so, you don't know how the mind of a mystic works. The Bible is so large and complex a book that almost any conceivable number can be made to have a Biblical significance. The only limit is the ingenuity of the human mind.

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Let's, for instance, take a look at 365.2422. The excess over the "proper" 360 is 5.2422. The figures to the right of the decimal point can be broken up into 24 and 22, and the average is 23. What, then, is the significance of the 23?

We have settled that the 5 represents the five books of the Law. That leaves the Prophets and the Writings. How many books are contained in those? The answer is 34.*

That doesn't seem to get us anywhere—but wait. Twelve of the books are relatively short prophetic works: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. For convenience, in ancient times, these were often included in a single roll which was referred to as the Book of the Twelve.

Thus, in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus (accepted as canonical by the Catholics) the author—writing about 180 B.C.—lists the great men of Biblical history. After mentioning the major prophets individually, he lumps the minor prophets together:

Ecclesiasticus 49:10. *And of the twelve prophets let the memorial be blessed . . .*

Well, then, if the twelve minor prophets are included as a single book—as there is ample precedent for doing—how many books are there in the Prophets and Writings together by the Jewish/Protestant count? Why, 23.

We can therefore say that of the number of days in the year (365.2422), 360 days represent the "correct" figure, 5 days represent the Law and 0.2422 represent the Prophets and the Writings. The days of the year thus become a memorial to the Old Testament.

That takes us to the number of lunar months in the year, which is 12.369, the number that first attracted my attention.

If the days in the year represent the Old Testament, then surely the lunar months in the year must represent the New Testament. Any mystic will tell you that this is self-evident.

Well, then, what can we say would be a central difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament? We might try this—In the Old Testament, God is treated as a single entity, while in the New Testament, He is revealed as a Trinity. Consequently, if this is so, and if the number of lunar months in a year represents the New Testament, that number should somehow be related to the number 3.

And if we look at 12.369, we see that it is neatly divisible by 3.

* *At least according to Jews and Protestants. The Catholic version of the Bible includes eight additional books considered apocryphal by Jews and Protestants.*

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Hurrah! We are on the right track, as any fool can plainly see (provided he *is* a fool, of course).

Let us, then, divide 12.369 by 3, and we come out with 4.123. Surely that is a highly significant number, consisting as it does, of the first four integers.

And what connection do the first four integers have with the New Testament. Why the answer is obvious and springs to the mind at once.

The four gospels, of course! The four separate biographies of Jesus by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

It so happens that Gospels 1, 2, and 3—Matthew, Mark and Luke—give essentially the same view of Jesus. Many of the incidents found in one are found in the others and the general trend of events is virtually identical in all. These are the "synoptic Gospels," the word "synoptic" meaning "with one eye." Gospels 1, 2, and 3 all see Jesus with the same eye, to to speak.

Gospel 4, that of John, is quite different from the other three, differing, in fact, on almost every point, even quite basic ones.

Therefore, if we are going to have the number of lunar months in the year signify the Gospels, would it not be right to group 1, 2, and 3 together and keep 4 separate? And is this not precisely what is done in a number like 4.123?

If you had doubts before, would you not admit we were on the right track now?

We can say then that of the number of lunar months in a year, 12.369, the 12 represents the Gospel of John (4 times 3, for the Trinity) and the 0.369 represent the Synoptic Gospels (123 times 3.)

But why is the Fourth Gospel first? Why is a third of the number of lunar months in a year 4.123, rather than 123.4?

This is a good and legitimate question, and I have an answer. If the central fact of the New Testament is the Trinity, we must ask how the matter of the Trinity is handled in the various Gospels.

The first evidence of the existence of all three aspects of God together is at the time of Jesus's baptism by John the Baptist (who, of course, is *not* the John who wrote the Fourth Gospel). In Mark, the oldest of the Gospels, the incident at the baptism is described as follows:

Mark 1:10. *And . . . he* [Jesus] *saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him:*

Mark 1:11. *And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*

Here Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all present at once: Nothing in this account, however, would make us necessarily think that this man-

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ifestation was apparent to anyone outside the Trinity. There is nothing to make us suppose, for instance (if Mark only is considered), that John the Baptist, who was present at that moment, was also aware of the descent of the Spirit, or heard the voice from heaven.

Similar accounts are given in Matthew 3:16-17, and in Luke 3:22. Neither in Matthew nor in Luke is it stated that anyone outside the Trinity was aware of what was happening.

In John's Gospel, however, the Fourth, the account of the descent of the Spirit is placed in the mouth of John the Baptist. .

> John 1:32. *And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him.*

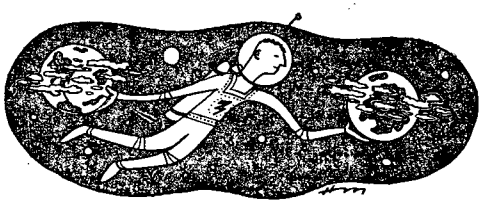
Since, in Gospel 4, the first manifestation of the Trinity is described as clearly apparent to man—something that is not so in Gospel 1, 2, and 3—then obviously the number *ought* to be 4.123, rather than 123.4.

What more can anyone want?

Now let me emphasize something which I hope has been quite apparent to everyone. I am merely playing with numbers. What I have presented here in connection with the days and months in the year has been made up out of my head, and I am no more serious about it than I was, once long ago, about the alphabeticity of Abou ben Adhem.

And yet I would not be in the least surprised to find that some people were tempted to think there was something to all this nonsense. They might wonder if I had accidentally stumbled on a great truth without knowing it, even while I was imagining myself to be doing nothing more than playing silly games.

And I suppose that some people (maybe even the same people) would say: "Hey, I'll bet Abou ben Adhem's name led all the rest because the list *was* in alphabetical order."



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The implications of even the most tentative sort of death control are staggering, and as the biological sciences gradually begin to touch in the areas of aging and death, more and more good science fiction is being written about the possible effects of immortality. Last month's story by Gerald Jonas, THE FIRST POSTULATE, *bears an interesting comparison to the story below by talented John Brunner. Although both suppose the same general reaction, i.e., a spiritual one, the differences are more remarkable than the similarities.*

THE VITANULS

by John Brunner

BEFORE THE SOUNDPROOF, germproof double glass window of the delivery room the matron of the maternity hospital came to a halt. "And there," she told the tall young American from the World Health Organisation, "is our patron saint."

Barry Chance blinked at her. She was a brisk fortyish Kashmiri woman with an aura of efficiency, not at all the kind of person one would expect to make jokes about her life's work. And indeed there had been no trace of jocularity in her tone. But in this teeming subcontinent of India a stranger could never be sure.

He compromised. "I'm sorry," he lied. "I didn't catch that . . . ?"

Out of the corner of his eye he studied the man the matron had indicated. He was elderly and balding; what little hair remained to him had whitened into a sort of halo around his heavily lined face. Most Indians, the American had noticed, tended to grow fat with age, but this man had gone scrawny, like Gandhi. Surely, though, an ascetic appearance and a halo of hair weren't enough to establish a claim to sainthood?

"Our patron saint," the matron repeated, sublimely unaware of her visitor's bewilderment. "Dr. Ananda Kotiwala. You're very fortunate to see him at work. It's his last day here before he retires."

Struggling to make sense of her remarks, Chance stared unashamedly at the old man. He felt his rudeness was excused by the fact that this corridor adjoining the delivery room was a kind of public gallery. On every side there were relatives and friends of the expec-

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tant mothers, down to and including very small children who had to stand on tiptoe to peer in through the double glass window. There was no such thing as privacy in India unless you were rich, and in any overcrowded, underdeveloped country a minimal fraction of the people enjoyed that luxury he'd taken for granted since childhood.

The fact that toddlers could watch, fascinated, the arrival of their new brothers and sisters was accepted here as a part of growing up. Chance reminded himself sternly that he was a foreigner, and—what was more—a doctor himself, trained at one of the few colleges that still administered the Hippocratic Oath in full form to its graduates. He forced his personal preconceptions to the back of his mind and concentrated on unravelling the curious comment the matron had made.

The scene before him offered no hints. All he could see was a typical Indian hospital delivery room, containing thirty-six mothers in labour, of whom two were suffering agonies and screaming—at least, to judge by their open mouths; the soundproofing was extremely good.

He wondered briefly how Indians felt about their children entering the world under such circumstances. What it suggested to him was an assembly-line, the mothers reduced to machines producing their quota of infants according to a pre-planned schedule. And all of it so dreadfully public!

Again, though, he was falling into the trap of thinking like a modern American, parochially. For untold generations most of mankind had been born publicly. Although it had been estimated that the world's present living population was just about equal in number to all the human beings there had ever been before the twenty-first century, the majority of Earth's people continued that ancient tradition, and made a birth a social event: in villages, an excuse for a celebration, or as here a sort of family outing to the hospital.

The modern aspects of the event were easily listed. The attitudes of the mothers, for instance: one could tell at a glance which of them had enjoyed up-to-date prenatal instruction, for their eyes were closed and their faces bore expressions of determination. They knew what miracle was going on in their bodies, and they intended to help it, not resist it. Good. Chance nodded approval. But there remained the women who were screaming, as much from terror as pain, probably . . .

He shifted his attention with an effort. After all, he was supposed to be conducting a survey of the methods in use here.

The latest recommendations of the experts seemed to be being properly applied—you'd expect as much in a large city where most of the medical staff had had the bene-

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fit of training abroad. Some time soon he was committed to going out into the villages, and things would be different there, but he'd think about that when he had to.

The elderly doctor who had been called "our patron saint" was just completing the delivery of a boy. Gloved hand held up the latest recruit to the army of humanity, glistening. A slap—correction: a beautifully restrained tap with the open palm, enough to provoke a squall and the first deep breath, but not enough to aggravate the birth-trauma. And handed over to the waiting nurse to be laid on the little bench beside the bed, lower than the mother so that the last few precious ounces of maternal blood could seep down from the placenta before the cord was severed.

Excellent. All in accordance with the best modern practice. Except—why was the doctor having to explain so much so patiently to the awkward girl holding the child?

Chance's puzzlement was brief; then he remembered. Of course. There weren't enough trained nurses in this country to allot one to every new mother. So those girls standing neat and scared in their disposable plastic overalls, their lank black hair bound in sterile plastic snoods, would be younger sisters or eldest daughters doing their best to help out.

Then the old man, with a final smile of reassurance, was leaving the worried girl and going to hold the hand of one of the women screaming.

Chance watched with satisfaction as he soothed her, bringing about a complete relaxation within moments, and—as far as could be guessed through the double barrier of soundproof glass and an incomprehensible language—instructing her how best to hasten the delivery. Yet there was nothing more here than he'd seen in a hundred hospitals.

He turned to the matron and asked directly. "Why do you call him 'patron saint'?"

"Dr. Kotiwala," the matron said, "is the most—now what would it be in English? Is there the word 'empathetic'?"

"From 'empathy'?" Chance frowned. "I don't think so. But I get what you mean, anyway."

"Yes," the matron said. "Did you not see how he quieted the one who was screaming?"

Chance gave a slow nod. Yes, come to think of it, it must be regarded as a special gift in a country like this—to be able to break through the superstitious fright of a woman barely above peasant-level and make her see what it had taken other women around her the full nine months of pregnancy and much skilled instruction to understand. Now there was only one woman screaming with her mouth wide, and the doctor was soothing her in her turn. The other he'd just

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spoken to was struggling to encourage her contractions.

"Dr. Kotiwala is wonderful," the matron went on. "Everybody loves him. I have known parents to consult astrologers not to determine the most fortunate birthday for their child but only how to make sure it is born during Dr. Kotiwala's shift in the delivery room."

Shift? Oh yes: they operated a three-shift day. Once more the image of the assembly-line came to him. But it was far too advanced a concept to reconcile with the idea of applying to astrologers. What a crazy country! Chance repressed a shiver and admitted to himself that he'd be glad when he was allowed to return home.

For long moments after that he was silent, noticing something he hadn't previously spotted: how, when the labour pains permitted, the mothers opened their eyes and hopefully followed Dr. Kotiwala's progress around the room as if wanting to invite him to spend a minute or two at their bedside.

This time their hopes weren't fulfilled. There was a breeches presentation at the far end, and it would take careful manipulation to reverse the baby. Plastic-clad, a beautiful dark girl of about fifteen bent to watch what the doctor was doing, putting out her right hand so that the tense anxious mother could clasp it for comfort.

By his own standards, Chance thought, there was nothing extraordinary about Kotiwala. He was obviously competent, and his patients appeared to like him, but he was old and rather slow, and one could see how cautiously he moved now the end of his shift was near and he was tiring.

On the other hand, it was admirable to find the human touch in a birth-factory like this. He'd asked the matron, within minutes of his arrival, how long the average stay of a patient might be, and she'd said with a wry smile, "Oh—twenty-four hours for the easy ones, and perhaps thirty-six for cases with complications."

Looking at Dr. Kotiwala, one might have assumed there was all the time in the world.

From an American standpoint even that didn't constitute a claim to sanctity, but through Indian eyes doubtless things looked different. The matron had warned him that he'd come at a busy time, nine months after a big spring religious festival which people regarded as auspicious for increasing their families. The warning hadn't prepared him for the reality; the hospital was *packed.*

Yet it could have been worse. He shuddered a little. The back of the problem was broken, but there were still something like 180,000 new mouths to feed every day. At the peak of the population explosion there had been just under a quarter-million per day; then the impact of modern medicine was

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felt, even people in India, China and Africa began to recognise the need to plan for the children they could afford to feed, clothe and educate, and the crisis diminished.

Nonetheless it would be years before the children of that peak period could become teachers, workers, doctors to cope with the tremendous pressure. Thinking along these lines brought him to a subject which had been engaging a lot of his attention recently, and he spoke aloud without intending to.

"People like him, in this of all jobs—that's who they ought to choose!"

"I beg your pardon?" the matron said with positively British formality. The British had left ineradicable traces on the intellectuals of this country.

"Nothing," Chance muttered.

"But did you not say someone ought to choose Dr. Kotiwala for something?"

Annoyed with himself, yet—once reminded of the dilemma shortly to be sprung on the world—unable to hold his tongue, Chance gave ground.

"You said it was Dr. Kotiwala's last day here, didn't you?"

"Why, yes. He retires tomorrow."

"You have someone in mind to replace him?"

The matron shook her head vigorously. "Oh no! In the physical sense, yes, in that another doctor will take his shifts, but men like Dr. Kotiwala are rare in any generation and in modern times most of all. We're dreadfully sorry to lose him."

"Has he—uh—passed some arbitrary retirement age?"

The matron smiled thinly. "Hardly, in India! We can't afford the luxuries you Americans go in for, and that includes putting usable material—human or otherwise—on a scrapheap before it's worn out."

With his eyes on the elderly doctor, who had successfully reversed the breeches presentation and moved on to attend to the woman in the next bed, Chance said, "He's retiring voluntarily, then."

"Yes."

"Why? Has he lost interest in his work?"

The matron was shocked. "Of course not! I'm not sure I can make his reasons clear, though." She bit her lip. "Well, he is very old now, and he fears that one day soon a child may die because he has let his attention wander. It would set him back many steps on the road to enlightenment if that happened."

Chance felt a surge of enlightenment himself. Believing he completely understood what the matron meant, he said, "In that case he damned well deserves—"

And broke off, because strictly he ought not to be thinking about this subject, or talking about it.

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"What?" the matron said, and when Chance shook his head, went on: "You see, when he was young Dr. Kotiwala was much influenced by the teachings of the Jains, to whom the taking of any life at all is repugnant. When his desire to cherish life led him to study as a doctor, he had to accept that some killing—of bacteria, for example—is inevitable to ensure human survival. His kindliness is based on religious principles. And it would be more than he could bear to think that his own arrogance in continuing to work when it was no longer safe had cost an innocent baby its life."

"He can hardly be a Jain now," Chance said, lacking anything else by way of comment. Privately he was thinking that if what the matron said was correct, there were some old fossils back home who could do with a dose of Kotiwala's humility instead of hanging on until they were practically senile.

"He's a Hindu, as are most of our people," the matron explained. "Though he tells me his thinking has been much influenced by the teachings of Buddhism—which began, after all, as a Hindu heresey." She didn't sound greatly interested in what she was saying. "But I'm afraid I still don't understand to what you were referring a moment ago," she added.

Chance thought of gigantic factories owned by Du Pont, Bayer, Glaxo and heaven knows who else, labouring night and day with more expenditure of energy than a million mothers bringing forth commonplace human beings, and decided that the facts were going to be public knowledge soon enough for him to risk lifting a corner of the curtain of secrecy. It was getting him down to keep his mouth shut all the time.

He said, "Well, what I meant was that if I had any say in the matter people like him would get priority when it comes to—uh—the most advanced kinds of medical treatment. To preserve somebody who's liked and admired seems better than saving someone who is mainly feared."

There was a pause.

"I think I follow you," the matron said wisely. "I take it that the anti-death pill is a success?"

Chance started. She gave him another of her wry smiles.

"Oh, it's difficult for us to keep up with the literature when we work under such pressure, but there have been hints, haven't there? You in the rich countries like America and Russia have been trying for years to find a broad-spectrum specific against aging, and I think—knowing your countries by hearsay—there must have been a long angry argument over who should benefit first."

Chance surrendered completely and gave a miserable nod. "Yes, there's a specific against senility. It isn't perfect, but pressure on the

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drug companies to put it into commercial production has grown so great that just before I left WHO Headquarters to come here I heard the contracts were being placed. A course of treatment will cost five or six hundred dollars and last for eight to ten years. I don't have to tell you what it'll mean. But if I had my way, I'd pick someone like your Dr. Kotiwala to enjoy the results before all the stupid old men with power and wealth who are going to have their obsolete ideas carried into the future by this breakthrough!"

He stopped short, alarmed at his own vehemence and hoping that none of the curious spectators surrounding them could speak English.

"Your attitude does you credit," the matron said. "But in one sense it's inexact to say Dr. Kotiwala is retiring. He might prefer to say he's changing his career. And if you offered to give him anti-senility treatment I expect he would smile and refuse."

"Why in the world—?"

"It is hard to make clear in English." The matron frowned. "You know what is a sunnyasi, perhaps?"

Bewildered, Chance said, "One of those holy men I've seen around the place, wearing nothing but a loincloth and carrying a begging-bowl."

"And a staff, usually."

"A sort of fakir?"

"Not in the least. A sunnyasi is a man in the final stage of his life's work. He can have been anything previously—a businessman, commonly, or a civil servant, or a lawyer, or even a doctor."

"You mean your Dr. Kotiwala is going to throw away all his medical skills, all the service he could still perform in this overcrowded country even if he did risk the life of a baby one of these days, and go out begging in a loincloth for the sake of his own salvation?"

"This is why we call him our patron saint," the matron said with an affectionate smile in Dr. Kotiwala's direction. "When he is gone from here, and has collected such virtue, he will be a friend for us who remain behind."

Chance was appalled. A moment ago the matron had been saying India could not afford to throw aside people with good work still before them; now here she was seeming to approve a plan that struck him as compounded of equal parts selfishness and superstition.

"Are you telling me he believes this nonsense about stacking up virtue for a future existence?"

The matron gave him a cold stare. "I think that is uncivil of you. The teaching of Hinduism is that the soul is born again, throughout an eternal cycle, until it achieves one-ness with the All. Can you not appreciate how a lifetime of work among the newly-born makes all this real to us?"

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"You believe it too?"

"That's irrelevant. But . . . I do witness miracles every time I admit a mother to this hospital. I witness how an animal act, a process with slimy, messy, *bloody* associations brings about the growth of a reasoning being. I was born, and you, a squally helpless infant, and here we stand talking in abstract concepts. Maybe it's a mere function of chemical complexity; I don't know. I told you, I find it hard to keep up with the literature."

Chance stared through the window of the delivery room with a puzzled frown. He felt somehow disappointed—even cheated—after his near-acceptance of Dr. Kotiwala in the matron's admiring terms. At length he muttered, "I guess maybe we'd better move on."

The sensation of which Dr. Kotiwala was chiefly aware was weariness. It went all through his body, to the marrow of his bones.

There was no hint of it in his outward behaviour—no suggestion that he was mechanically going through the motions. The mothers who entrusted themselves and their offspring to his care would have detected any such failing, with perceptions deeper than ordinary, and he would have known the truth himself and felt he was betraying his trust.

But he was unspeakably, incredibly tired.

More than sixty years had passed since he graduated from medical school. There had been no change in the way human beings were created. Oh, the trappings had changed as medicine made its successive impacts; he remembered the inarguable disasters caused by drugs like thalidomide, and the upside-down blessings of antibiotics that swamped countries like his own with more mouths than it could possibly feed, and now he was working with techniques which meant that nine out of ten of the children born under his supervision were wished-for, loved by their parents instead of being a burden or condemned to the half-life of illegitimacy.

Sometimes things turned out well, and sometimes badly. In the course of his long and valuable career Dr. Kotiwala had come to place reliance on no other principle.

Tomorrow . . .

His mind threatened to wander away from what he was doing: bringing to independent life the latest of all those he had delivered. How many thousands of mothers had moaned on the bed before him? He dared not count. And how many more thousands of new lives had he helped to launch? Those he less-than-dared to count. Perhaps he'd introduced to life a thief, an ingrate, a murderer, a fratricide . . .

No matter. Tomorrow—indeed,

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today, for his shift was over and this baby he was now raising by the feet was the last he would ever deliver in a hospital, though if he were appealed to in some miserable village he would doubtless help . . . Tomorrow there would be an end to worldly attachments. He would commit himself to the life of the spirit, and—

He checked. The woman alongside the mother, her sister-in-law, very much disturbed by the things she had had to do, like sterilising her hands in disinfectant and stripping off her best sari in favour of a clammy plastic overall, spoke a fearful question.

He hesitated over his answer. To the superficial glance nothing about the baby seemed amiss. It was a boy, physically whole, the usual flushed postnatal colour, letting out an acceptable scream to greet the world. All was as it should be. And yet . . .

He cradled the baby on his left arm while deftly raising first one, then the other eyelid. Sixty years of practice had made him gentle. He stared deep into the vacant light eyes, contrasting almost frighteningly with the skin around them.

Beyond them was—was . . .

But what could one say to a child as new as this? He sighed and gave it into the care of the sister-in-law, and the clock on the wall ticked away the last few seconds of his shift.

Nonetheless his mind remained on the indefinable impulse which had compelled him to take a second look at the boy. When the doctor taking over from him arrived, Dr. Kotiwala finished his summary briefing by saying, "And there's something wrong with the boy just born in Bed 32. I can't put my finger on it. But if you get the chance, check him over, would you?"

"Will do," said the relief doctor, a fat young man from Benares with a shiny brown face and shiny soft hands.

The matter continued to irk Dr. Kotiwala even though he'd spoken about it. Changed, showered, ready to leave, he still lingered in the corridor to watch his colleague checking the baby as requested, making a thorough inspection from head to sole. He found nothing wrong, and catching sight of Dr. Kotiwala as he turned away, spread his hands and shrugged, his attitude implying, "Fuss about nothing if you ask me!"

Yet when I looked into those eyes, something behind them suggested . . .

No, it was absurd. What could any adult hope to read in the eyes of a brand-new baby? Wasn't it a kind of arrogance that made him think his colleague was missing something of vital importance? In a dilemma, he considered the idea of going back in the delivery room and taking another look.

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"Isn't that your patron saint standing there?" Chance muttered to the matron in a cynical tone.

"Why, so it is. How fortunate! Now you can make his acquaintance yourself—if you wish to."

"You've painted him in such glowing colours," Chance said dryly, "I feel I'd be wasting a chance if I didn't meet him before he takes off his clothes and goes native."

The irony was almost completely lost on the matron. She bustled ahead with exclamations, but interrupted herself the moment she noticed Kotiwala's glum expression.

"Doctor! Is something wrong?"

"I don't know," Kotiwala sighed. His English was good, but heavily accented in the singsong rhythm which the departed British rulers of India had nicknamed "Bombay Welsh." "It is the child just born in Bed 32, a boy. I am *sure* something is wrong, but as for what it is, I'm lost."

"In that case we must see to him," the matron said briskly. Clearly she had implicit faith in Kotiwala's opinions.

"Dr. Banerji has examined him and doesn't agree with me," Kotiwala countered.

In the matron's view Kotiwala was Kotiwala and Banerji was nobody; her expression said so, louder than words. It struck Chance that here was his opportunity to find out whether the matron's trust had any real basis.

"Look, rather than taking up Dr. Banerji's time—he has a lot to cope with in there—why don't you bring the child out and we'll take a look at him?"

"Dr. Chance, from WHO," the matron explained. Absently Dr. Kotiwala shook hands.

"Yes, that is a good idea. A second opinion, wouldn't you say?"

It had been in the back of Chance's mind that his comparatively fresh training would enable him to apply some tests Kotiwala wasn't accustomed to using. In fact it was the other way around; the slow, thorough palping of the child's body and limbs with which the old Indian began wasn't in Chance's line at all. Of course, it had its advantages, provided one knew the normal location of every bone and major muscle in the infantile frame. Anyway, it revealed nothing.

Heart normal, blood pressure average, all external appearances healthy, reflexes present and vigorous, fontanelle a trifle large but within normal range of variation . . .

After nearly three-quarters of an hour, Chance was convinced the old man was doing it to make an impression, and consequently was losing his temper by degrees. He noticed that Kotiwala again and again rolled up the boy's eyelids and stared into the eyes, as if he could read the brain behind. On

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the latest repetition of the act he snapped, "Tell me, doctor! What do you see in his eyes, hm?"

"What do *you* see?" Kotiwala countered, and motioned for Chance to look also.

"Nothing," Chance grunted a moment later. They'd checked the eyes, hadn't they, along with everything else?

"That's what I see, also," Kotiwala said. "Nothing."

Oh, for goodness' sake! Chance spun on his heel and went to the side of the room, peeling off his gloves preparatory to dumping them in the disposer. Over his shoulder he said, "Frankly, I don't see anything wrong with the kid at all. What do you think it is? The soul of an earthworm turned up in his body by mistake, or something?"

Kotiwala could hardly have missed the scorn with which the words were uttered, but his reply was perfectly calm and civil.

"No, Dr. Chance, I think that hardly likely. After a great deal of contemplation I've come to the conclusion that the traditional ideas are inaccurate. The human condition is a human thing. It embraces the imbecile and the genius, but it doesn't overlap with any other species. Who could claim that the soul of a monkey, or a dog, is inferior to that which looks out of the dirty windows of a moron's eyes?"

"I certainly wouldn't," Chance said with sarcasm, and began to strip off his gown. Kotiwala sighed, and shrugged, and was silent.

Later...

The sunnyasi Ananda Bhagat wore nothing more than a loincloth, owned nothing more in all the world than the begging-bowl and staff he carried. Around him —for it was cold in the hill-country this bleak December—the people of the village shivered in their cheap coarse clothes, spending as much time as they could spare huddled over their tiny fires. They burned woodchips, rarely charcoal, and even now a great deal of cowdung. The foreign experts had told them to use cowdung for fertiliser, but the warmth of a fire was closer to the present than the mystery of fixed nitrogen and next year's crops.

Ignoring the chill, ignoring the strong smoke of the fire as it wandered upward and filled the gloomy hut, Ananda Bhagat spoke soothingly to a fearful girl of about seventeen at whose breast a baby clung. He had looked into its eyes, and there he had seen—nothing.

It was not the first such in this village; it was not the first village where he had seen the same. He accepted that as a fact of existence. With the abandonment of the name Kotiwala had gone the preconceptions of the Doctor of Medicine, Trinity College, Dublin, who had obeyed the behests of intellectualism in the sterile wards of a big city hospital. Throughout his

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eighty-five years he had sensed a greater reality looming over him, and his final decision had been to commit himself to it.

Now, as he gazed wonderingly into the empty face of the child, he heard a noise. The young mother heard it also, and cowered because it was loud and growing louder. So far had Ananda Bhagat come from his former world that he had to make a conscious effort before he identified it. A drone in the sky. A helicopter, a rarity here; why should a helicopter come to any particular one of India's seventy thousand villages?

The young mother whimpered. "Be still, my daughter," the sunnyasi said. "I will go and see what it is."

He let her hand fall with a final comforting pat and went out of the misshapen doorway to stand on the cold windy street. The village had only one street. Shading his eyes with his thin hand, he peered upward into the sky.

Yes: a helicopter, circling and glinting in the weak winter sunlight. It was descending, but that was nothing to do with his emergence into plain view. Before he recognised the sound of it, it must already have been coming down.

He waited.

In a little while, the people came chattering out of their homes, wondering why the attention of the outer world in the form of this curious noisy machine should be turned on them. Seeing that their marvellous visitor, the holy man, the sunnyasi—such as he were few these days, and to be cherished—was standing firm, they drew courage from his example and likewise stood up boldly.

The helicopter settled in a blast of whirling dust, a little away from the beaten track called a street, and a man jumped down from it: a tall fair-skinned foreigner. He looked the scene over slowly, spotted the sunnyasi and let out an exclamation. Calling something to his companions, he began to stride up the street. Two others came down to stand beside the machine and talk in low tones: a girl of about twenty, in a sari of blue and green, and a young man in flying overalls, the pilot.

Clutching her baby to her, the young mother also came out to see what was going on, her first child—a toddler—pursuing her on unsteady feet with a hand outstretched to catch at her sari if his balance failed him.

"Dr. Kotiwala!" the young man from the helicopter said.

"I was," the sunnyasi agreed in a rusty voice. The whole vocabulary of English had sloughed off his mind like a snake's overtight skin.

"For God's sake!" The young man's voice was harsh. "We've had enough trouble finding you without your playing word-games with us now we're here! Thirteen villages we've had to stop at on the

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way, picking up clues and being told you were here yesterday and moved on . . ."

He wiped his face with the back of his hand.

"My name's Barry Chance, in case you've forgotten me. We met at the hospital in—"

The sunnyasi interrupted. "I remember very well, thank you. But who am I, that you spend so much time and energy trying to find me?"

"As far as we can tell, you're the first person ever to have recognised a Vitanul."

There was a silence. During it, Chance could almost see the sunnyasi's persona fading, that of Dr. Kotiwala replacing it. The change was reflected in the voice, which resumed its "Bombay Welsh" rhythm on the next words.

"My Latin is negligible, for I only learned what was necessary in medicine, but I take it that would be from *vita,* a life, and *nullus* . . . You mean: like this one here?" He gestured for the young mother beside him to advance a pace, and rested his hand lightly on her baby's back.

Chance looked the infant over and at length shrugged. "If you say so," he muttered. "She's only about two months old, isn't she? So without tests . . ."

His voice trailed briefly away.

"Yes, without tests!" he burst out abruptly. "That's the point! Do you know what became of the boy you said had something wrong with him, the very last one you delivered before you—ah—*retired*?" There was great fierceness in his voice, but it was not directed at the old man he was talking to. It was simply the outward sign that he had been driven to the end of his resources.

"I have seen many others since," Kotiwala said. It was definitely not the sunnyasi speaking now, but the trained doctor with a lifetime's experience behind him. "I can imagine, but tell me anyhow."

Chance gave him a look that reflected something close to awe. The inquisitive villagers gathered nearby recognised the expression, and deduced—though not even the best-educated among them could follow the rapid English words—that the stranger from the sky was affected by the aura of their holy man. They relaxed noticeably.

"Well . . . your friend the matron kept insisting that if you'd said something was wrong with him there *must* be something wrong, although I'd said he was okay, Dr. Banerji had said he was okay. She went on and on about it until it was interfering with my work and delaying my departure. So I said to hell with it and had him taken out to WHO in Delhi for the most complete battery of tests they could lay on. Can you guess what they found?"

Kotiwala rubbed his forehead wearily. "Total suppression of the

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alpha and theta rhythms?" he suggested.

"You did know!" The accusation in Chance's voice was enough to shatter the barrier of language and communicate to the listening villagers, some of whom stepped menacingly closer to the sunnyasi as though to defend him if they had to.

Kotiwala waved them back with a reassuring gesture. He said, "No, I didn't know. It just now came to me what you would find."

"Then how in heaven's name did you—?"

"How did I guess the boy wasn't normal? I can't explain that to you, Dr. Chance. It would take sixty years of work in a maternity hospital, seeing scores of babies born every day, to make you see what I saw!"

Chance bit back a fierce retort and let his shoulders droop. "I'll have to swallow that. But the fact remains: you did realise, within minutes of the kid being born, even though he looked healthy and none of our tests has ever revealed any organic deformity, that his brain was—was empty and there was no *mind* in it! Christ, the job I had convincing them at WHO that you'd really done it, and the weeks of argument before they'd let me come back to India and try to track you down!"

"Your tests," Kotiwala said, as though the last sentence hadn't been spoken. "Many of them?"

Chance threw his hands in the air. "Doctor, where the hell have you been these past two years?"

"Walking barefoot from small village to small village," Kotiwala said, deliberately taking the question literally. "I haven't followed news from the world outside. This is a world for these people." He indicated the rough street, the mean shacks, the ploughed and planted fields, and the blue mountains closing all of it in.

Chance took a deep breath. "So you don't know and don't really care. Let me fill you in. Only a matter of weeks after I saw you, the news broke which led to my recall from India: reports of a sudden appalling rise in congenital imbecility. Normally a child begins to react in at least a sketch for a human pattern while it's still very young. Precocious kids smile quickly, and any kid is likely to distinguish movement and bright colours, and reach out to grasp things . . ."

"Except these you have named Vitanuls?"

"Exactly." Chance clenched his fists as though trying to seize something out of the air. "No life! None of the normal reactions! Absence of normal cerebral waves when you test them on the EEG, as though everything that makes a person human had been—had been left out!"

He levelled a challenging arm at Kotiwala's chest. "And you recog-

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nised the very first one of all! Tell me how!"

"Patience." Bowed by the weight of his years, Kotiwala still held himself with immense dignity. "This rise in imbecility—it struck you directly after I retired from the hospital?"

"No, of course not."

"Why 'of course'?"

"We were too tied up with—Oh, you've been out of touch, haven't you?" Chance spoke with bitter sarcasm. "A minor triumph of medicine was making all the headlines, and giving WHO enough headaches to be going on with. The anti-senility treatment had been made public a few days after I saw you, and everybody and his uncle was standing on line yelling for it."

"I see," Kotiwala said, and his aged shoulders finally hunched into an attitude of despair.

"You see? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Forgive my interrupting. Continue, please."

Chance shivered, apparently as much at what he was remembering as at the chill December air. "We'd done our best, and postponed announcement of the treatment until there were stocks enough to treat several million applicants, but of course that was as bad as announcing it in the lab stage, because everybody's grandmother seemed to have died last Friday and here were people screaming at us for killing them by neglect, and—Hell, you get the picture. Whichever way we handled it came out wrong.

"And then shoveled in on top of that mess came the new one. Congenital imbecility hits ten per cent of births, twenty, thirty! What's going on? Everybody whizzes around in little circles because just as we were congratulating ourselves on sorting out the row about the anti-senility treatment, here comes the most fantastic crisis in history and it's not going to break, it's going to get worse, and worse, and *worse* . . . Over the past two weeks the rate has topped eighty per cent. Do you understand that, or are you so sunk in your superstitions it doesn't bother you any longer? Out of every ten children born last week, no matter in what country or continent, eight are *mindless animals!*"

"And you think the one we examined together was the very first?" Kotiwala disregarded the harshness of the younger man's words; his eyes were staring, unfocused, into the blue distance over the mountains.

"As far as we can work it out." Chance spread his hands. "At any rate, when we checked back we found the first kids of which this had been reported had been born on that particular day, and I happened to remember that the time of birth of the earliest we'd heard about was an hour or so after I met you."

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"What happened on that day?"

"Nothing that could account for it. Every resource of the UN has been put to work; we've sifted the world's records to the very bottom, and not that day only but the time nine months earlier when these kids must have been conceived—only that doesn't fit either, because some of them were preemies as much as six weeks early, and they're the same, they're hollow, empty, drained . . . If we weren't at the end of our tether, I'd never have done such a crazy thing as coming to look for you. Because after all, I guess there isn't anything you can do to help, is there?"

The fire and rage which had burned in Chance when he arrived had died to ashes now, and he seemed to have no more words. Kotiwala stood thinking for a minute or more, and the villagers, growing restless, chattered among themselves.

At last the old man said, "The —the anti-senility drug. It's a success?"

"Oh yes. Thank God. If we hadn't some consolation in the midst of this mess I think we'd all go crazy. We've cut the death-rate fantastically, and because we planned well we can hope to feed the surplus mouths, and—"

"I think," Kotiwala broke in, "I can tell you what happened on the day we met."

Dazed, Chance stared at him. "Then for heaven's sake tell me! You're my last hope—you're *our* last hope."

"I can't offer hope, my friend." A sound like the echo of doom's own knell coloured the soft words. "But I can make what they call an educated guess. Did I not read once a calculation which showed that as many people are alive in this twenty-first century as have ever lived since the evolution of human beings?"

"Why—yes. I saw that myself, a long time back."

"Then I say that what happened on the day we met was this: the precise number of all the human beings there have ever been was exceeded for the very first time."

Chance shook his head in bewilderment. "I don't see—or—or *do* I?"

"And it so turns out," Kotiwala continued, "that at the same time or very shortly afterward, you find, and make available the world over, a drug which cures old age. Dr. Chance, you will not accept this, because I remember you made a kind of joke about an earthworm, but I do. I say that you have made me understand what I saw when I looked into the eyes of that newborn child, when I looked into the eyes of this little girl here." He touched the arm of the young mother at his side, and she gave him a shy quick smile.

"Not the lack of mind, as you have been saying. But the lack of a soul."

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For a few seconds Chance imagined that he heard the hollow laughter of demons in the whisper of the winter wind. With a violent effort he rid himself of the delusion.

"No, that's absurd! You can't mean to make out that we've run short of human souls, as though they were stored up in some cosmic warehouse and issued off the shelf every time a child is born! Oh, come now, doctor—you're an educated man, and this is absurd."

"As you say," Kotiwala agreed politely. "That is something I won't venture to dispute with you. But I owe you my thanks, anyhow. You've shown me what I must do."

"That's great," Chance said. "Here I come half across the world hoping that you'll tell me what I must do, and instead you claim I've told you . . . What? What must you do?" A final flicker of hope leapt up in his face.

"I must die," said the sunnyasi, and took his staff, and his bowl, and without another word to anyone, even the young mother whom he had been comforting when Chance arrived, he set off with slow old-man's paces along the road that led to the tall blue mountains and the eternal ice by whose aid it was lawful for him to set free his soul.

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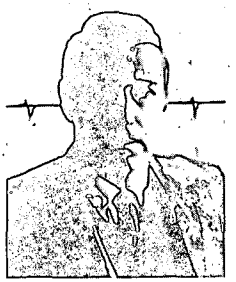

Tom Wright

KEITH LAUMER
His complete short novel, THE DAY BEFORE FOREVER, begins on page 4 of this issue.

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